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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 third 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.

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\* E/ICEF/2021/9.

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



## I. Overview

1. Girls and women are bearing the brunt of the crisis brought about by the global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which has exacerbated inequities and reinforced gender inequalities. Widespread unemployment and economic insecurity, as well as significant service disruptions related to maternal health, sexual and reproductive health, nutrition and education, are jeopardizing the lives and livelihoods of women and girls. Adolescent girls face particular risks of violence, child marriage and dropping out of school, even after schools reopen. Childcare and school closures, and increased care needs of the elderly and sick have increased the burden of unpaid care work borne by women, of which girls are likely to assume a substantial share. Women also bear greater risk on the front lines of the outbreak, as they account for about 70 per cent of health workers globally. Evidence points to an increase in cases of domestic violence against women by as much as 30 per cent in some countries.<sup>1</sup>

2. In 2020, UNICEF implemented its largest-ever emergency response, working with partners to adapt programming towards continuity of essential services, including support for frontline workers and expansion of social protection systems. The launch in 2020 of the revised Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (CCCs) with clear gender equality benchmarks has ensured more deliberate gender integration throughout UNICEF humanitarian action. Delivery of gender results continued to expand in such areas as quality maternal care, including nutrition counselling in pregnancy; promotion of positive gender socialization; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)-related services, including menstrual health and hygiene (MHH); gender-responsive social protection; approaches to tackling child marriage; and empowerment of adolescent girls with skills. UNICEF-supported empowerment and skills training reached 3.2 million adolescent girls, 900,000 more than in 2019. Gender-based violence in emergencies programming almost doubled as compared to 2019, while the number of programme countries receiving support for gender-responsive social protection tripled from 2019. UNICEF steadily improved the gender responsiveness of its institutional systems and strategies, meeting 88 per cent of the benchmarks of the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in 2020.

3. Stronger cooperation and drastically accelerated action is needed to reverse the impact of COVID-19 on gender outcomes. With its partners, UNICEF will continue to invest in health-related results for women and girls, especially during adolescence, including on HIV, nutrition and sexual and reproductive health, in a context of ongoing service disruptions. UNICEF will also redouble efforts to expand quality education and skills acquisition for adolescent girls and reduce their vulnerability to violence and harmful practices through joint action with United Nations system partners. Gender socialization programming to address the root causes of inequality remains a cross-sectoral priority, to drive the transformation of discriminatory norms across all dimensions of the lives of women and girls. In addition, UNICEF will continue to invest in internal gender capacity and accountability systems and in improving gender-related data and evidence, in both development and emergency contexts. Lessons learned from the COVID-19 response will be integral to shaping the new UNICEF gender policy and action plan and defining a bolder role for UNICEF as a global gender equality champion in the years ahead.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Impact of COVID-19 on SDG progress: a statistical perspective”, Policy Brief No. 81, August 2020.

## II. Introduction

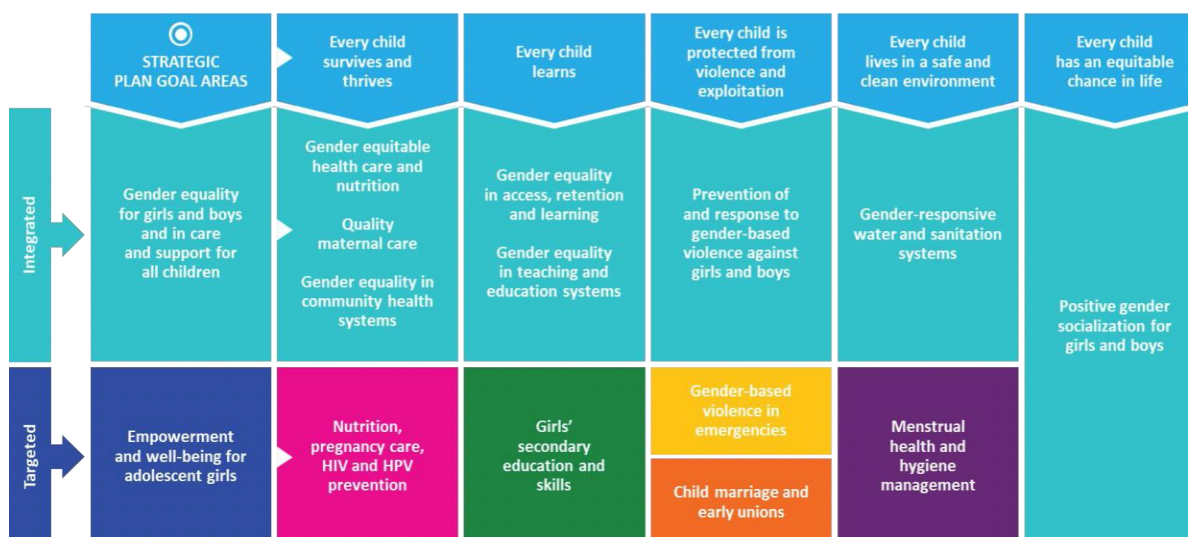
4. UNICEF commitments to advancing gender equality in its programmes and the workplace are articulated in the UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2018–2021. This report highlights the emerging trends, challenges and progress made since 2018, emphasizing programming interventions in 2020. It also includes key gender results in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which are closely aligned with the Gender Action Plan.

## III. Programmatic results

5. 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

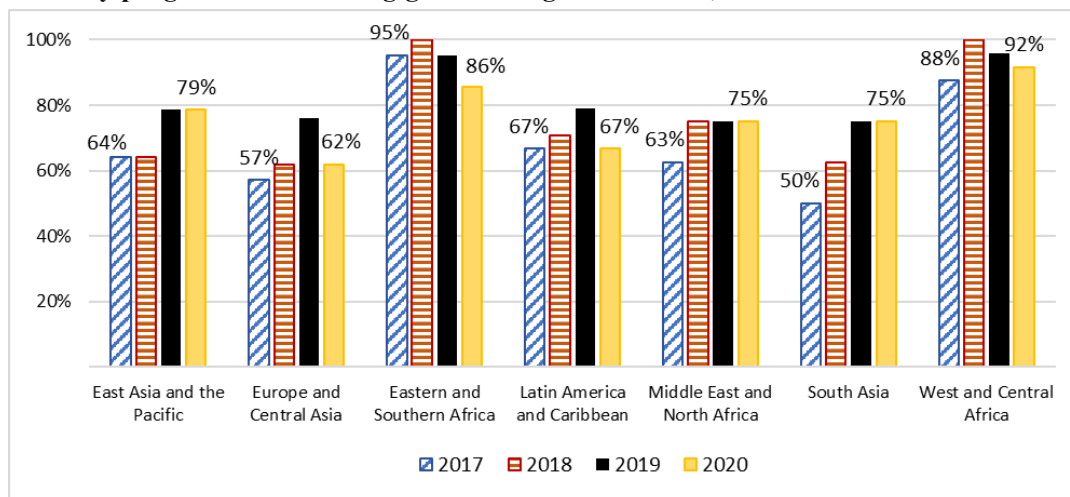


## A. Integrated gender results

6. In 2020, a total of 98 UNICEF country offices included at least one or more integrated gender results in their programming. Of those country offices, the highest number prioritized education, maternal care and ending gender-based violence in their programmes.

Figure II

Country programmes including gender integrated results, 2017–2020



### 1. Quality and dignified maternal care

7. In 2020, in 52 high-burden maternal mortality countries, 30.5 million live births occurred in health facilities supported by UNICEF. As in 2019, 60 per cent of pregnant women received at least four antenatal visits in 2020, with a 2021 target of 65 per cent, while the percentage of mothers receiving postnatal care increased to 61 per cent, with a 2021 target of 62 per cent. Skilled health personnel attended 78 per cent of live births, 1 per cent short of the overall target. By 2020, 38 high-burden countries had implementation plans to strengthen quality maternal and newborn health care, an increase of 7 countries over 2019, despite disruptions caused by COVID-19, already surpassing the overall target of 30 high-burden countries. In the face of overwhelmed health systems and much-reduced medical services, UNICEF invested in strengthening remote and mobile delivery systems to ensure continuity of services and improve collection of perinatal metrics.

8. Support for caregiver health and mental well-being is an essential element in the continuum of quality care, especially in the context of COVID-19, where increased childcare needs and rising unemployment have exacted a significant toll on female caregivers.<sup>2</sup> UNICEF is scaling up this area of programming to focus on care and support for parents and caregivers, including adolescent mothers. A resource package, rolled out in eight countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America, was used to train front-line workers to help caregivers to cope with heightened stressors due to COVID-19, especially related to increased unpaid care work among female caregivers and increased risk of gender-based violence. In Bulgaria, more than 5,000 parents of children under 3 years of age (about 4,250 mothers and 800 fathers) benefited from individualized support on health and nurturing care through home-visiting services, which also delivered critical COVID-19-related information when national health services were suspended. In Jordan, WhatsApp groups provided caregivers with

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, “The impact of COVID-19 on women”, Policy Brief, 9 April 2020.

guidance and peer support on nurturing care, age-appropriate child learning activities, positive parenting and stress management. In Eritrea, an offline mobile app was created to reach communities with no Internet connectivity with COVID-19 information. The app also allowed health workers to assist mothers in staying on schedule for perinatal care and infant vaccinations and to include fathers in sharing childcare responsibilities. UNICEF is prioritizing transformative interventions that address the root causes of gender inequalities, such as promoting equitable parenting strategies and male involvement in childcare.

## 2. Equal health care and nutrition for girls and boys

9. By the end of 2020, 75 countries had inclusive, gender-responsive national plans to reach targets on adolescent health, up from 67 countries in 2019 and meeting the 2021 target. UNICEF supported implementation in 36 of the 75 countries, focusing in 2020 on expanding access to continued services. In the United Republic of Tanzania, UNICEF and partners supported government efforts to scale up HIV prevention and treatment interventions for adolescents, increasing from 24 districts to 33 and surpassing the 2020 target. Those services were uninterrupted during the pandemic.

10. UNICEF supports the prevention of malnutrition in women, girls and boys, through strengthening of national policies and service delivery, and advocating for expanded nutrition counselling and healthy diets. In Uzbekistan, UNICEF contributed to a new maternal and child nutrition action plan for 2020–2025, which aims to reach 7 million children and almost 6 million women annually. In 2020, 71 countries integrated nutrition counselling into their pregnancy care programmes, an increase from 57 countries in 2019, exceeding the target of 70. The rate of pregnant women who received iron and folic acid supplementation rose from 36.6 per cent in 2019 to 37.3 per cent in 2020, with a 2021 target of 41 per cent. For example, UNICEF-supported delivery of micronutrients to all 17 health districts in the Comoros Islands reached more than 16,500 pregnant women.

11. Nutrition service delivery was significantly disrupted, especially during school closures. In 2020, UNICEF-supported programmes reached 35 million girls and boys with services to prevent anaemia and other forms of malnutrition. UNICEF supported Governments to rapidly adapt to the challenges. In Pakistan, training for more than 16,000 service providers on COVID-19-specific nutrition guidelines contributed to the delivery of safe nutrition services to 14 million women and children. Community outreach in the State of Palestine on complementary feeding and diet diversity benefited more than 785,000 caregivers, while almost 1.4 million women and children – including in the most vulnerable communities in the northeast and the south of the country – were screened for malnutrition, and 6,500 children (more than half girls) received treatment for severe acute malnutrition.

12. Although globally 87 per cent of pregnant women living with HIV in 2019 received antiretroviral treatment through UNICEF-supported programmes,<sup>3</sup> regional disparities are stalling overall progress. In response, UNICEF is intensifying efforts to scale up proven interventions. Capacity-building of front-line health workers and adaptation of HIV services, including supervision of health-facility providers, mother-to-mother peer support and on-site coaching, has helped to improve access to quality prevention and treatment services. In Liberia and Zimbabwe, the proportion of pregnant women who received antiretroviral treatment reached 91 and 95 per cent, respectively. Continued support by UNICEF and partners to reduce HIV vertical transmission rates have put countries like Eswatini and Sao Tome and Principe close to elimination status.

<sup>3</sup> The global estimate represents 35 UNICEF Strategic Plan priority countries for HIV.

### **3. Gender equality in health systems and among the workforce**

13. The COVID-19 crisis amplified the value of community health workers, the majority of whom are female, in ensuring continuity of emergency health services during social isolation measures, and in disseminating critical public health information to reduce virus risk. In the Syrian Arab Republic, community health workers continued to provide vital immunization to underserved populations, with 2.6 million children (50 per cent girls) receiving the polio vaccine integrated with vitamin A supplementation. Polio social mobilizer teams from the UNICEF-run Immunization Communication Network reached more than 37,000 children in eastern and southern Afghanistan.

14. By 2020, all 25 focus countries had formally integrated community health workers into their health systems, meeting the target for 2021. Progress was noted in the 25 countries with high burden of childhood illnesses that reported data between 2016 and 2020, where a total of 227,131 workers enhanced their skills with UNICEF support.

### **4. Equality in education for girls and boys**

15. UNICEF renewed efforts to promote equitable opportunities to continue learning, despite the widespread closure of schools. This included scaling up gender-responsive distance education, through digital platforms and offline strategies that addressed, among other issues, the lack of Internet connectivity and mobile devices among the most marginalized. Following the launch of television and radio distance learning programmes in Côte d'Ivoire, UNICEF and partners established a community-based education monitoring system specifically targeting girls. The system uses village education committees comprising teachers, mothers, community health workers and leaders to track self-directed learning, teacher and peer support, protection from gender-based violence and child marriage, health outcomes such as early pregnancies, and life skills development.

16. Globally, UNICEF reached 301 million children with distance learning, 49 per cent of them girls. More than 48 million out-of-school children participated in early learning and primary or secondary education through UNICEF-supported programmes, compared to 17 million in 2019. A total of 18.6 million girls benefited in 2020, compared to 8.4 million in 2019. In humanitarian settings, UNICEF prioritized education access in its emergency response, contributing to a sharp increase in the number of girls who participated in early learning, primary or secondary education through UNICEF-supported programmes, from 23 million in 2019 to 42 million in 2020 (as compared to 24 million boys in 2019 and 43.5 million boys in 2020).

### **5. Gender equality in teaching and learning systems**

17. UNICEF continued to support countries to improve the gender-responsiveness of their teaching and learning systems, contributing in 2020 to 42 per cent of countries (52 countries) having gender-responsive education systems, compared to 38 per cent in 2019. In addition, 44 countries with UNICEF-supported programmes had teaching and learning systems that integrated gender equality principles into education programming, training and measurement activities, representing 42 per cent of countries reporting, compared to 40 per cent in 2019. UNICEF supported the Government of Viet Nam in 2020 in expanding inclusive and gender-responsive online teacher training and production of digital, television and radio learning resources (with sign language and subtitles in multiple ethnic languages) for both students and teachers, benefiting 20.9 million students, about half of them girls.

18. In 2020, 7.7 million children (more than 3.2 million girls) participated in UNICEF-supported skills development programmes, increasing from more than 4 million in 2019, and representing more than triple the number who participated in 2018. In Senegal, UNICEF supported entrepreneurial skills development among out-of-school adolescents and youth, with a focus on girls, reaching some 455,000 young people.

19. Progress towards gender equality in education, already uneven pre-pandemic, is showing concerning signs of reversal, with disproportionate impacts on girls. Cut off from school peer networks, girls are more vulnerable to violence and harmful practices, a heavier burden of domestic chores, reinforced discriminatory gender norms and a gender digital divide, all of which hinder their learning outcomes. Out of 55 countries reporting improvements in learning outcomes in 2020, the proportion of countries where girls improved rose by 1 per cent from 2019 (from 55 to 56 per cent) compared to those where boys improved, which increased from 49 to 65 per cent. Without significantly stronger investment to address the underlying causes of gender disparities, meeting the target of 79 per cent of countries with improved learning outcomes is unlikely.

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

20. In the light of concerns over increases in gender-based violence, UNICEF and partners scaled up prevention and response services, situating them as integral to the national health emergency response to the pandemic. The increase contributed to 4.2 million children who experienced violence being reached with health, social work and justice services, 53 per cent more than those reached in 2019. The need is considerable, requiring urgent increases in investment to strengthen reporting mechanisms and build national service-delivery capacity.

21. UNICEF leveraged existing inter-agency partnerships to adapt and accelerate programming, with an emphasis on minimizing disruptions and expanding services. A wide slate of technical guidance and service-delivery protocols was rapidly disseminated, including on helplines, support for child protection workers and safety in online spaces. To strengthen national response systems, UNICEF invested in service delivery, both online and offline, such as child helplines, remote case management, supporting social workers with personal protective equipment, partnering with local women's organizations to reach vulnerable groups, and using traditional and social media and mobile applications to spread information about risk mitigation and response services.

22. In the Plurinational State of Bolivia, a new "safe family" helpline that provided psychosocial counselling, parenting advice and referrals to violence protection services received more than 25,000 calls (62 per cent from women and girls). Similarly, in the Congo and Gabon, the first-ever toll-free "green" lines for survivors and witnesses of gender-based violence were set up. UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) brokered an innovative partnership between the Government and the hospitality sector in Mexico to expand safe shelters for women survivors and their children through hotels.

23. UNICEF redoubled its efforts to increase awareness among parents, children and communities through online platforms to continue emphasizing parenting support and gender-transformative norms and behaviour change interventions. An estimated 2.6 million mothers, fathers and caregivers across 87 countries were reached through UNICEF-supported parenting programmes related to gender-equitable parenting, positive discipline and mental health support for families, a 14 per cent increase over 2019.

24. The COVID-19 pandemic has threatened to reverse important gains made in eliminating female genital mutilation (FGM). Preliminary estimates by UNFPA foresee 2 million additional cases occurring over the next decade that otherwise might have been averted. UNICEF-supported prevention and protection services related to FGM reached 1.6 million girls in 2020 as compared to 1.2 million in 2019, but efforts will need to be accelerated. Community sensitization about FGM continued either through mass media or by inserting messaging within public information campaigns on COVID-19 and/or gender-based violence, reaching 16.4 million people, almost double the number reached in 2019. Support for community-level surveillance mechanisms is ongoing. Following public declarations in Nigeria, local women's associations created surveillance committees that helped to disseminate combined messages about virus prevention and FGM, and report cases to community leaders using WhatsApp. In five states, almost 117,000 girls and women were reached with prevention and protection services, exceeding the 2020 target of 76,500. In Djibouti, community protection committees saved 764 girls from undergoing FGM.

## **7. Gender-responsive water, sanitation and hygiene systems**

25. To address the significant disruptions to WASH services in 2020, UNICEF concentrated on continuing and improving service provision across 120 countries. With UNICEF direct support, 17 million additional people gained access to safe drinking water (7.3 million women and girls in countries reporting sex-disaggregated data), and more than 13 million additional people had access to basic sanitation services (6.9 million women and girls). This brings the cumulative total of people with access to safe water to 53.9 million, increasing from 37 million in 2019, and the cumulative total accessing basic sanitation to 39.6 million, as compared to 26.3 million in 2019. In humanitarian settings, more than 20 million women and girls accessed safe and sufficient water of appropriate quality. About 104 per cent of UNICEF-targeted populations (6.35 million women and girls) in humanitarian situations were able to access appropriate gender-segregated WASH facilities in schools, temporary learning spaces and other child-friendly spaces. Of note in 2020, 70 UNICEF country programmes had integrated the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines for Integrating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action into their WASH programming, a critical step to ensuring that humanitarian preparedness, response and recovery adequately integrate gender differential WASH needs.

26. UNICEF continued to support gender-responsive WASH sector governance and systems strengthening to increase inclusivity and improve outcomes for girls and women. In 2020, more than 70,500 schools were equipped with separate sanitation facilities for girls and boys, including those living with disabilities. In Madagascar, a gender subcluster for the WASH sector was created to challenge gender norms relating to water collection. UNICEF support in Mongolia contributed to a government commitment to ensure that new in-school latrines would be gender-separated.

27. Considering the huge need for infection prevention and control due to COVID-19, UNICEF expanded efforts to equip health facilities with basic WASH services. More than 5,600 health centres were reached through UNICEF-supported programmes in 2020 alone, a major increase over previous years, contributing to improvements in infection prevention during childbirth and quality of maternal care.



## 8. Positive gender norms and socialization for girls and boys

28. In 2020, 49 UNICEF country programmes across all regions carried out interventions to transform gender-discriminatory roles and norms and promote positive gender socialization, including in the COVID-19 context. The pandemic has reinforced discriminatory stereotypes and deepened pre-existing inequalities in homes and workplaces.

29. UNICEF supported research, funded in 2020 by the Governments of Canada and Luxembourg through the global thematic fund for gender equality, on the impact of targeted gender socialization programmes in Armenia, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Ghana, Kosovo,<sup>4</sup> Nepal, Sri Lanka, the United Republic of Tanzania and Viet Nam, in such areas as education, parenting, adolescent girls' empowerment, social sector workforce development and media marketing. In Armenia, research that revealed gender stereotypes – more specifically son preference among fathers – as the only statistically significant predictor of gender-biased sex selection, is informing the development of advocacy interventions. UNICEF is also expanding private sector partnerships to address gender bias in sectors that target children, such as toy manufacturing and media marketing.

30. Family-friendly policy interventions were accelerated in 2020. In 46 countries, UNICEF supported Governments in their efforts to strengthen policies, investment, business practices and public-private sector collaboration in four key areas: parental leave; support for exclusive breastfeeding for six months; affordable, accessible quality childcare; and provision of child benefits and adequate wages. In 18 of these countries, policies and legislation have been amended to address at least one of the four areas. UNICEF partnership with the All-China Federation of Trade Unions on flexible work arrangements, childcare and extended family leave reached about 590,000 employees. Similar interventions in Mongolia led to 18,000 public and private sector organizations introducing reduced working hours.

31. Positive parenting interventions educate parents on how to improve child well-being and engage fathers in gender-equitable caregiving and domestic responsibilities. In South Africa, UNICEF supported training for social workers in the MenCare programme to educate fathers to improve their caregiving skills and reflect on gender roles, reproductive decision-making and positive discipline.

32. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF dramatically stepped up investment in its social protection programming. National gender-responsive social protection programmes were supported in 90 countries in 2020, triple the number in 2019. In Sierra Leone, as part of the rapid adaptation and scale-up of the existing social safety net system during the outbreak to reach 65,000 new households, front-line social protection workers were trained to report gender-based violence and refer survivors to services. In the United Republic of Tanzania, UNICEF supported implementation of the adolescent-focused Cash Plus programme, which targets safe transitions to adulthood, livelihood skills development and service-provision related to sexual and reproductive health. In Ethiopia, under the auspices of the rural public works programme, UNICEF advocacy helped to remove a work requirement for mothers, allowing them to remain at home until their children are 2 years old. Greater investment will be needed to build on those efforts, especially to address the growing care crisis post-pandemic.

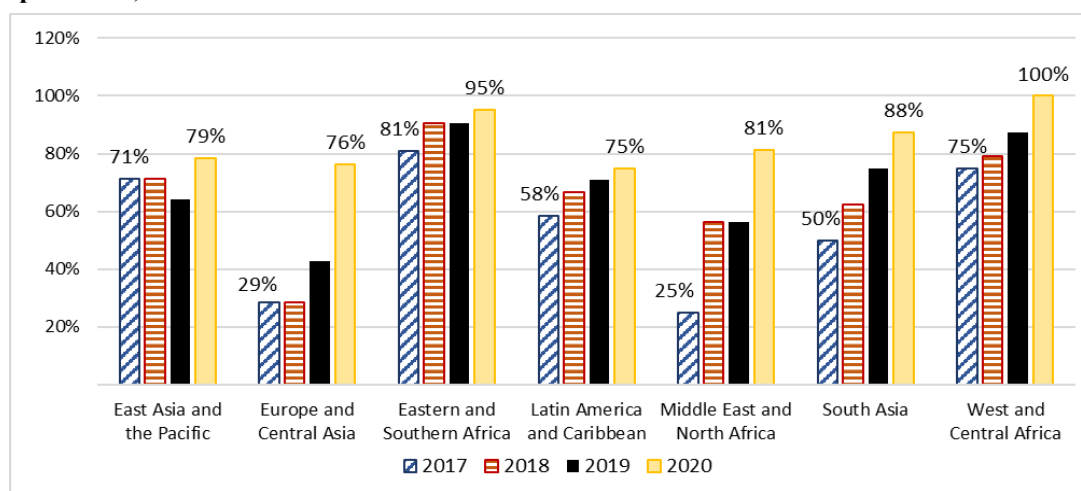
<sup>4</sup> All references to Kosovo should be understood in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

## B. Targeted priorities on empowering adolescent girls

33. Cross-sectoral approaches, strong partnerships and investment targeting the multiple and interlinked challenges adolescent girls face, especially the most vulnerable, helped to move the needle in such areas as adolescent girls' skills development, menstrual health and hygiene, addressing harmful practices, ending gender-based violence, and human papillomavirus (HPV) prevention.

34. In 2020, 85 per cent of all UNICEF country programmes included results from one or more of the adolescent girls' targeted priority areas, representing 19 more programmes than in 2019 and almost 30 per cent more than at the baseline. More countries are prioritizing the use of integrated empowerment approaches.

Figure III  
Country programmes including results on adolescent girls' empowerment priorities, 2017–2020



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

35. UNICEF remains focused on improving adolescent health services for girls, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, and on helping to shape more gender-responsive adolescent-related health policies. In 2020, 10.9 million adolescent girls were reached with services to prevent anaemia and other forms of malnutrition. In Ghana, UNICEF support contributed to 350,000 adolescent girls being reached with anaemia-control programmes through health facilities when schools closed, while in Bangladesh, similar interventions reached 1.6 million adolescent girls.

36. Progress on care for adolescent mothers (aged 15–19 years) has been uneven, although it is still on track to meet overall targets. Perinatal care in particular is trailing, especially for the most marginalized young mothers and infants. UNICEF continued to support 52 countries with high rates of maternal mortality to provide quality maternal care for adolescent mothers, contributing to 72 per cent of live births attended by skilled health personnel, an increase of 1 per cent from 2019, against an overall target of 75 per cent. The proportion of pregnant adolescent girls aged 15–19 years receiving at least four antenatal visits remained at 52 per cent, while the proportion of mothers of the same age receiving postnatal care increased from 57 per cent in 2019 to 59 per cent in 2020, with a target of 62 per cent. In South Africa, UNICEF partnered with mothers2mothers and the National Department of Health to expand a maternal care peer-mentoring initiative for adolescents and young women. Face-to-face visits shifted to virtual, interactive support groups via WhatsApp, leading to a significant increase in enrolment of adolescent mothers, from 5,400 in

2019 to almost 15,000 in 2020. In Jamaica, through the Spotlight Initiative and in collaboration with local women's rights organizations, "teen hubs" were established to provide 24-hour access to counselling through mobile messaging.

37. Gaps persist in addressing HIV among adolescents, especially girls. Worldwide, the annual number of new infections among adolescent girls has fallen by 35 per cent since 2010, well short of the 2020 global target of reducing HIV infections among all adolescents by at least 75 per cent. Fifteen million adolescent girls were tested and knew their status in 2020, nearly 5 million more than boys, representing a total of 1.5 million more girls tested than in 2019. However, the proportion of children living with HIV receiving antiretroviral therapy has hovered between 50 and 60 per cent since 2017, which is well below the 2021 target of 81 per cent.

38. There is an urgent need to tackle the underlying barriers to comprehensive testing, counselling and treatment, especially among the most vulnerable. UNICEF, with partners, continues to address the multiple vulnerabilities of adolescent girls by targeting distinct at-risk populations and locations. In partnership with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, UNICEF supported the inclusion of a strategy for girls and young women within the national HIV/AIDS strategic framework in Botswana, Lesotho and Somalia, and engaged 10 countries in West and Central Africa to optimize the quality and scale of coverage for that population in their prevention programmes.

39. The 2020 results for HPV vaccination were encouraging. The most recent data available on HPV vaccine introduction show a significant increase in target countries supported by UNICEF in the number of adolescent girls receiving the final vaccine dose (2.8 million). In addition, the number of countries that introduced the HPV vaccine into their immunization schedules doubled, from 8 to 16.

## **2. Girls' secondary education and skills-building**

40. In 2020, UNICEF-supported skills development, empowerment and employability training reached 3.2 million girls, an increase of 900,000 since 2019. For example, in Kosovo,<sup>5</sup> UNICEF-supported innovation and entrepreneurship programming to connect education and employment pathways for adolescent girls was formally accredited in 2020 and aligned with upper secondary education curricula.

41. Key gaps remain in secondary school completion among adolescent girls. Worldwide, four out of five girls complete primary school, but only two out of five complete upper secondary school.<sup>6</sup> In response, UNICEF and partners are supporting gender-transformative strategies that address barriers related to harmful norms, poverty, disability and distance; re-entry policies for adolescent mothers; and social protection measures such as cash transfers to remove financial barriers, all of which align with efforts to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on access to education worldwide. For instance, UNICEF supported the Governments of Timor-Leste and Uganda in the development of school re-entry policies for pregnant adolescents and young mothers.

42. Empowering adolescent girls with skills, including in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), remains a priority focus, and dedicated programming in that area is steadily gaining in scale and scope, boosted by private sector partnerships. The UNICEF Skills4Girls initiative launched in 2020 provides

<sup>5</sup> All references to Kosovo should be understood in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF, UN-Women and Plan International, "A new era for girls: taking stock of 25 years of progress", New York, March 2020.

support to girls in positioning themselves for equal and empowered participation in the workforce. More than 155,000 girls across 14 countries were reached by UNICEF-supported programmes fostering STEM learning, digital literacy, social entrepreneurship and transferable skills. In Kyrgyzstan, UNICEF is pioneering approaches to reach girls from migrant and settlement populations with STEM training and mentoring and job placement opportunities, while in Brazil, UNICEF partnered with young people and the private sector to develop a chatbot to tackle gender-discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes.

43. In 2020, more than 7.2 million adolescents (53 per cent girls) across 122 countries participated in and/or led civic engagement interventions through UNICEF-supported programmes in humanitarian and development settings, a significant increase from 2019 (4 million). UNICEF emphasizes girl-led approaches to foster leadership and civic participation. For example, in Ecuador, UNICEF, Plan International and other partners supported 10 adolescent girls in preparing a shadow report, which was presented at the seventy-seventh session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2020. The UNICEF-supported Saleema Initiative, part of the African Union initiative to end FGM, launched the Saleema Youth Victorious Ambassadors in 2020. The Ambassadors are six young women who will be spokespersons and advocates in each of the six regions of the African Union and the diaspora. Generation Unlimited, U-Report and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts launched a partnership in India, Mexico, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Africa to connect U-reporters to economic opportunities offered through Generation Unlimited.

### **3. Gender-based violence in emergencies**

44. The number of UNICEF country offices reporting results of gender-based violence in emergencies programmes almost doubled in 2020 compared to 2019 (from 46 to 84 countries), reflecting the impact of the public health pandemic on the safety and security of women and girls living in crisis settings.

45. A total of 17.8 million people in 84 countries received gender-based violence risk mitigation, prevention or response interventions. Almost 3,300 children with disabilities were also reached across 21 countries. A subregional UNICEF programme in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Serbia for women and children refugees and migrants provided services and safe spaces for gender-based violence survivors and those at risk, reaching almost 6,000 women and girls.

46. As the agency leading the global roll-out of the IASC Guidelines for Integrating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action, UNICEF continued to ensure that risk mitigation, which is also associated with COVID-19, was embedded within its sectoral and cluster work. More than 210,000 UNICEF personnel and partners completed training in risk mitigation and safe referrals in 83 countries with COVID-19 response plans. The UNICEF Communities Care programme, which focuses on transforming the inequitable gender norms that drive gender-based violence, was scaled up in Somalia in 2020 to target child marriage, teenage pregnancies and sexual violence, reaching 600,000 people (including 488,000 women and girls).

47. Ensuring uninterrupted life-saving response services was prioritized in 2020. In countries with lockdown measures and the resulting constraints on in-person services and safe spaces, UNICEF and partners pivoted to online or smartphone-based reporting and case management, including in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. In addition, UNICEF advocated with Governments in the Middle East and South Asia to issue special permits to protection workers to allow them to continue working in communities.

#### 4. Child marriage and early unions

48. The number of UNICEF country programmes addressing child marriage has steadily increased, from 38 in 2016 to 54 in 2020. Catalysed by the successes of the UNFPA/UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, many more countries are embracing multisectoral, evidence-based strategies to improve outcomes for at-risk adolescent girls. Despite a decline in the practice over the last decade, led notably by South Asia, no region is on track to eliminate child marriage by 2030. Indeed, gains are under serious threat due to COVID-19, which has put an estimated 10 million additional girls at risk before the decade's end.

49. Under the Global Programme, several countries, including Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique and Zambia, have strengthened their health and child protection systems to address child marriage. Almost 11.6 million adolescent girls in Global Programme countries accessed social protection, poverty reduction and economic empowerment programmes, with UNICEF support. At the regional level, UNICEF and other United Nations partners, together with the European Union and the African Union, launched the Spotlight Initiative Africa regional programme in July 2020, to leverage investments and scale up efforts to end harmful practices.

50. UNICEF supported countries in developing legislation and resourcing national action plans to address child marriage. In 2020, seven more countries developed costed plans, bringing the total to 30. In the Dominican Republic, UNICEF support for gender-transformative behaviour change interventions in schools and through mass media contributed to the passage of a bill establishing 18 years as the minimum age for marriage without exceptions.

51. In 2020, nearly 6 million adolescent girls were reached with prevention and care interventions, 300,000 more than in 2019. In more than 20 countries, UNICEF-supported programmes related to child marriage used multimedia platforms to communicate, educate and deliver services, supporting virtual safe spaces and engaging adolescent girls and their families. In Nepal, the UNICEF-supported Rupantaran programme provided social and financial skills training to nearly 23,600 girls, while in Sierra Leone, 11,000 girls were assisted in receiving life skills training through modified community-based activities, and 3.6 million people were reached with media messaging on child marriage and FGM.

#### 5. Dignified menstrual health and hygiene

52. Globally, 1.18 million girls and women benefited from emergency MHH services in 2020, increasing from 1 million in 2019.

53. UNICEF delivered hygiene kits, with menstrual products included as mandatory items, focusing on the most vulnerable communities, such as girls and women from ethnic and indigenous communities in Peru and Ukraine and those living in conflict settings in Somalia and Yemen. UNICEF also continued to help government partners to incorporate MHH into national health and education policies. In 2020, 53 countries reported that strategies for WASH in Schools included MHH targets, and almost 10,000 schools were equipped with MHH services. In 2020, for example, the Government of Guyana integrated a WASH in Schools plan, including an MHH component, into the national education policy in response to COVID-19. This resulted in WASH services being made available in 874 schools and MHH supplies reaching 23,000 girls.

54. UNICEF sponsored a wide range of advocacy and awareness-raising activities linking the effects of the pandemic on girls and women with their right to safe and dignified menstrual hygiene management. Under the campaign theme "Periods Don't Stop for Pandemics", a series of videos by female athletes was released in Pakistan,

while in India, the #RedDotChallenge on Twitter engaged more than 1 million people in its first 24 hours. On Menstrual Hygiene Day, a global multi-agency campaign reached 411 million people worldwide, 30 per cent more than in 2019. The innovative UNICEF Oky mobile app, co-created and tested with adolescent girls in Indonesia and Mongolia to provide information on MHH and sexual and reproductive health in adolescent-friendly formats, had recorded more than 50,000 active users by the end of 2020.

## **IV. Institutional strengthening**

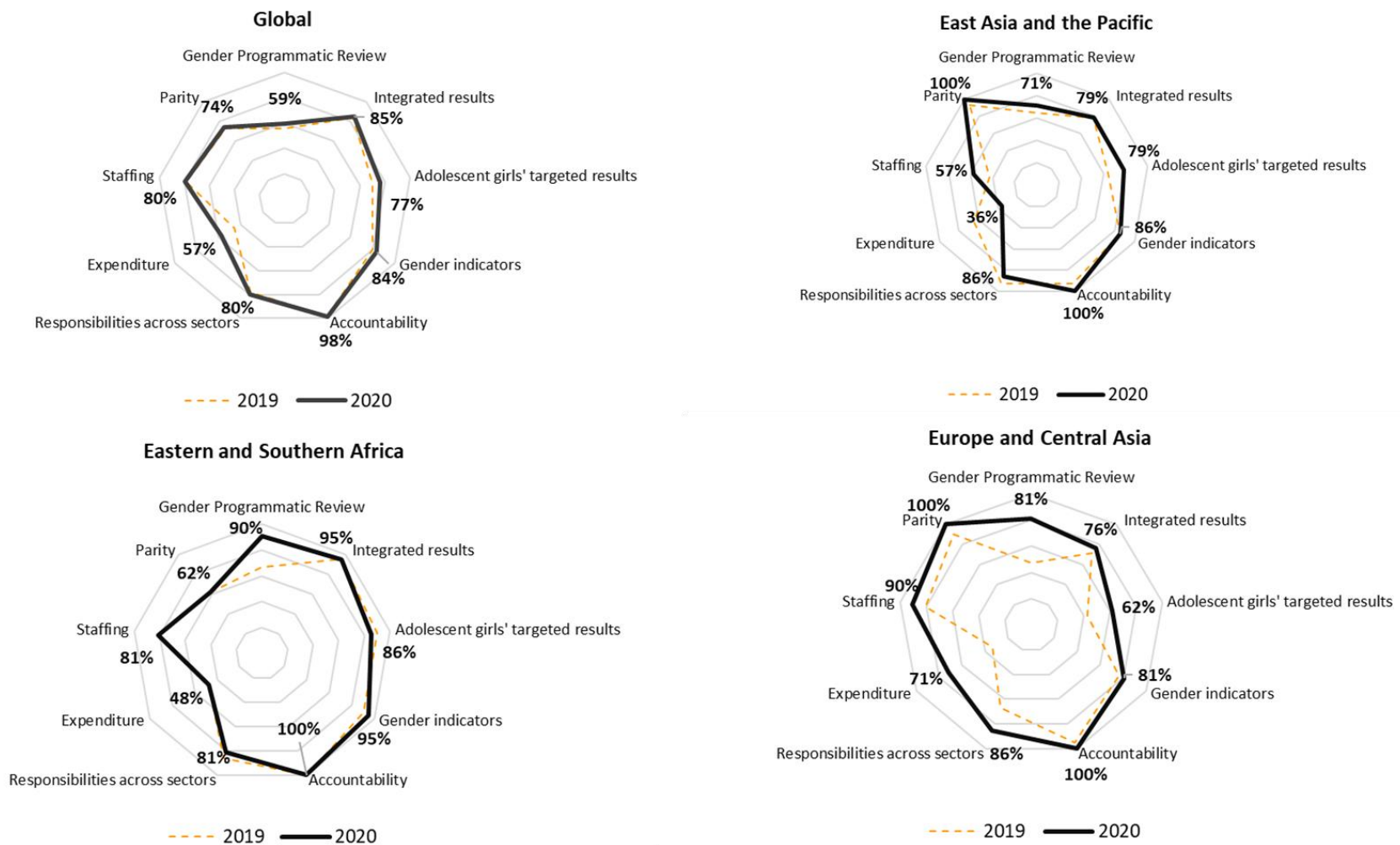
55. The Gender Action Plan prioritizes strategic areas for investments in institutional strengthening, emphasizing (a) gender equality in programming at scale; and (b) capacity and accountability on gender results. Performance in the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women continues to advance, and is a reflection of those investments. In 2020, UNICEF met or exceeded 88 per cent of all benchmarks, steadily rising from 82 per cent in 2019 and 76 per cent in 2018 to remain one of the highest-performing United Nations entities.

### **A. Gender equality in quality programming at scale**

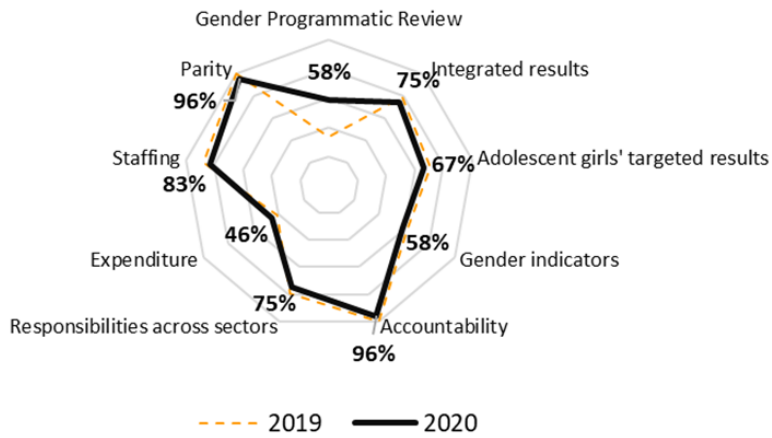
#### **1. From gender-responsive to gender-transformative programming**

56. UNICEF country offices are increasingly moving from simply responding to or fixing the manifestations of gender inequality to addressing the underlying bottlenecks and barriers to gender equality. A composite indicator, the GAP institutional standard, uses a series of benchmarks that enable country offices to track their efforts, including use of gender analysis in country programme design, monitoring, resourcing, capacity and accountability. In 2020, 68 per cent of UNICEF offices (87 out of 128 offices) met the standard, as compared to 62 per cent in 2019 and 49 per cent in 2018 (baseline). The Europe and Central Asia, Middle East and North Africa and South Asia regions all improved on their institutional benchmarks from 2019, primarily due to focused strengthening of their monitoring and accountability architecture. Globally, the number of gender programmatic reviews led by country offices increased from 81 in 2019 to 93 in 2020. Greater attention is needed in the West and Central Africa region to conduct such reviews and build country capacity to better integrate gender into accountability processes. UNICEF will increase efforts specifically to meet gender staffing and programme-integration benchmarks.

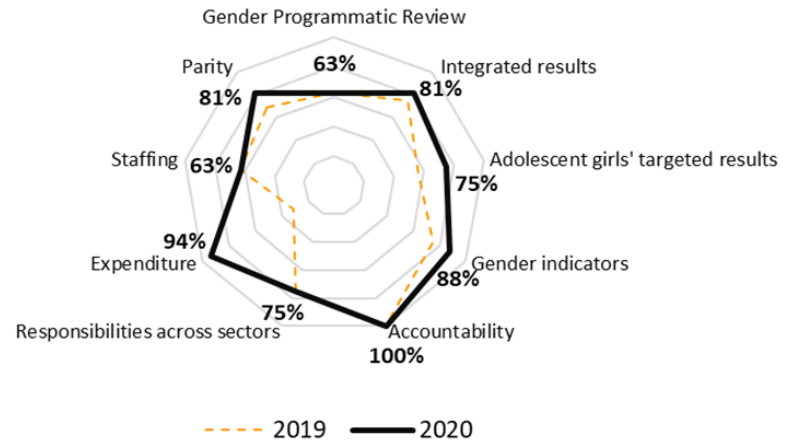
**Figure IV**  
**Percentage of UNICEF country offices that met institutional benchmarks globally and across regions, 2019 and 2020**



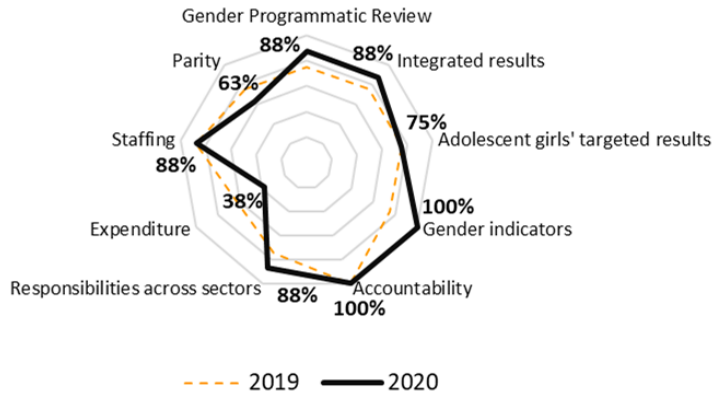
### Latin America and Caribbean



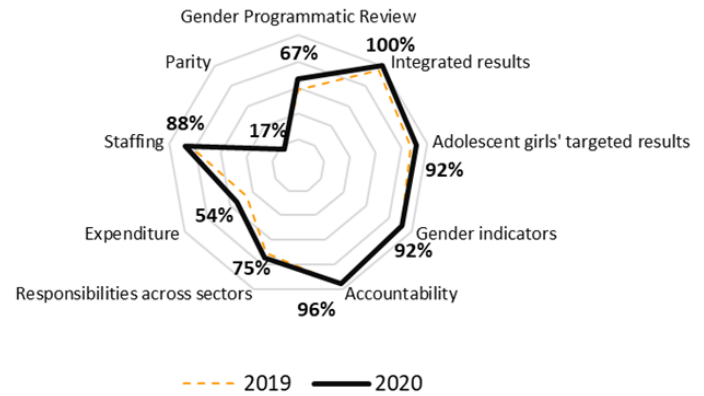
### Middle East and North Africa



### South Asia



### West and Central Africa





57. A humanitarian programming evaluation of the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action noted their limited gender integration beyond gender-based violence in emergencies and highlighted the need for gender-disaggregated data collection and analysis. In response to that evaluation, in 2020 UNICEF completed a revision to integrate gender equality standards and benchmarks into the Commitments.

58. During the COVID-19 pandemic, related analyses, tools and guidance were developed to strengthen gender integration within the emergency response at both global and country levels. In Argentina and the Philippines, rapid gender assessments were conducted in the context of COVID-19 and in Nicaragua, in the aftermath of tropical storms Eta and Iota. UNICEF is also engaged in inter-agency coordination structures at all levels, including on joint gender analyses. An “all hands-on-deck” approach with the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality and the United Nations Sustainable Development Group led to development of a minimum requirements checklist for gender integration in the implementation of the “UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19”. The checklist is being used by all United Nations country teams globally to apply a gender lens in their response plans and to allocate gender-earmarked resources from the United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund.

## **2. Gender data and evidence**

59. UNICEF continued to strengthen the evidence base for gender-informed policy and programming. For example, during the sixty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2020, UNICEF launched the data-driven report entitled, “A new era for girls: taking stock of 25 years of progress”, prepared in collaboration with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and Plan International, which assessed global progress made for girls in respect of the goals in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The report’s findings informed the UNICEF COVID-19 response and will help to define priorities in the UNICEF gender policy and action plan under development.

60. In the context of COVID-19, UNICEF conducted gender analyses of service disruptions collected through UNICEF rapid situation tracking for COVID-19 socioeconomic impacts, and from secondary analysis of multiple indicator cluster survey data on gender differentials in adolescents’ technology skills and the implications for remote learning by girls and boys during the pandemic. At the country level, ongoing challenges in gender data collection and analysis were compounded by the evolving nature of the pandemic. Still, deliberate efforts by UNICEF programmes to improve sex- and age-disaggregated data generation and analysis as part of the COVID-19 response resulted in an increase in the proportion of country offices reporting such data, from 5 per cent in June 2020 to 23 per cent in February 2021.

## **3. Strategic partnerships and communications**

61. UNICEF relies heavily on its partnerships with other United Nations agencies, national partners, global organizations, civil society and the private sector to fulfil its mandate on gender equality, meet the Sustainable Development Goals and advance the United Nations reform agenda.

62. UNICEF jointly implements the common chapter of the strategic plans of the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Children’s Fund and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women). 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.

63. In 2020, as part of COVID-19 response and recovery, UNICEF vastly expanded its partnerships with grass-roots women's organizations, such as in South Asia where women's networks are complementing government efforts to address gender-based violence. Global partnerships were mobilized, including with the Global Resilience Fund for Girls and Young Women, which helped to direct support to more than 200 networks and groups of women and girls in 91 countries during the pandemic.

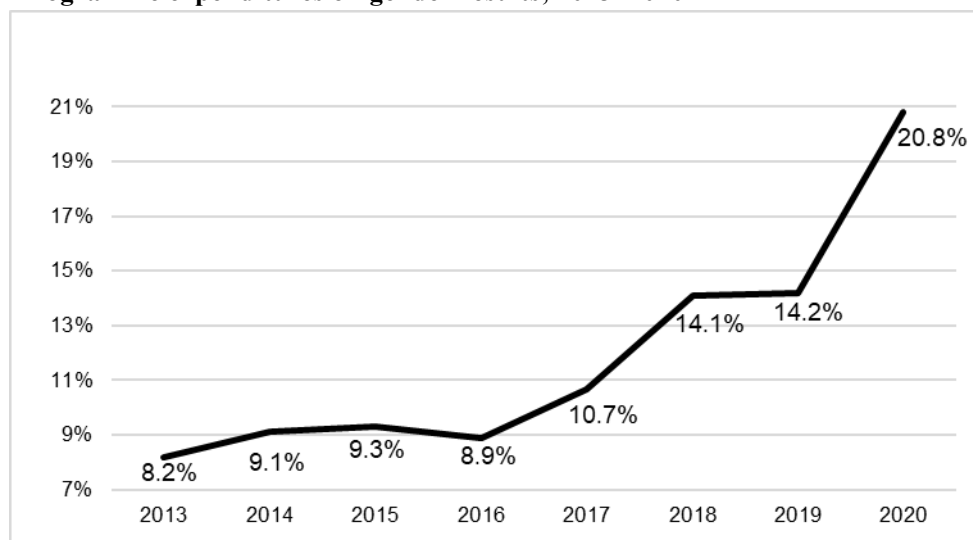
64. UNICEF expanded engagement with the private sector to promote family-friendly policies in the context of the COVID-19 response. Recommendations on mitigating the socioeconomic impact on workers in operations and supply chains were disseminated across business networks and National Committees for UNICEF in many countries, including the United States of America. Advocating for employment protection and family-friendly policies, the Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office reached more than 1,800 private and public organizations across 10 countries; the East Asia and Pacific Regional Office reached 6,000 private sector representatives.

65. In 2020, UNICEF had planned to take advantage of such high-profile events as the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations to ramp up visibility for gender equality issues. Despite the change in plans due to COVID-19, UNICEF continued to highlight those issues and the voices of adolescent girls through global channels, and reached a wider audience. UNICEF joined the Generation Equality campaign, a new multigenerational campaign organized by UN-Women for Governments, corporations and civil society change-makers to take decisive action on gender equality. For the International Day of the Girl Child, at least 50 country offices and National Committees held advocacy events to amplify girls' voices. Multilingual digital content across social media reached 16.3 million users. UNICEF will build on that engagement in 2021 to ensure that girls' concerns and voices are not diminished as a result of the pandemic.

#### **4. Resources**

66. 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. The gender expenditure is calculated by measuring activities and outputs having gender equality as the principal or a significant objective. On the basis of this formula, expenditure on gender-transformative results in 2020 was 19.6 per cent, significantly higher than the 14.2 per cent reported in 2019 and surpassing the benchmark. Further, it is estimated that 20.8 per cent of total expenditure (approximately \$1.19 billion, 6.6 percentage points higher than in 2019) contributes to gender mainstreaming, as measured by outputs where gender equality is either a significant or marginal objective. The higher reported expenditures reflect data provided by country offices in the Middle East and North Africa and South Asia regions that received technical assistance in 2020 to improve their expenditure reporting.

Figure V  
**Programme expenditures on gender results, 2013–2020**



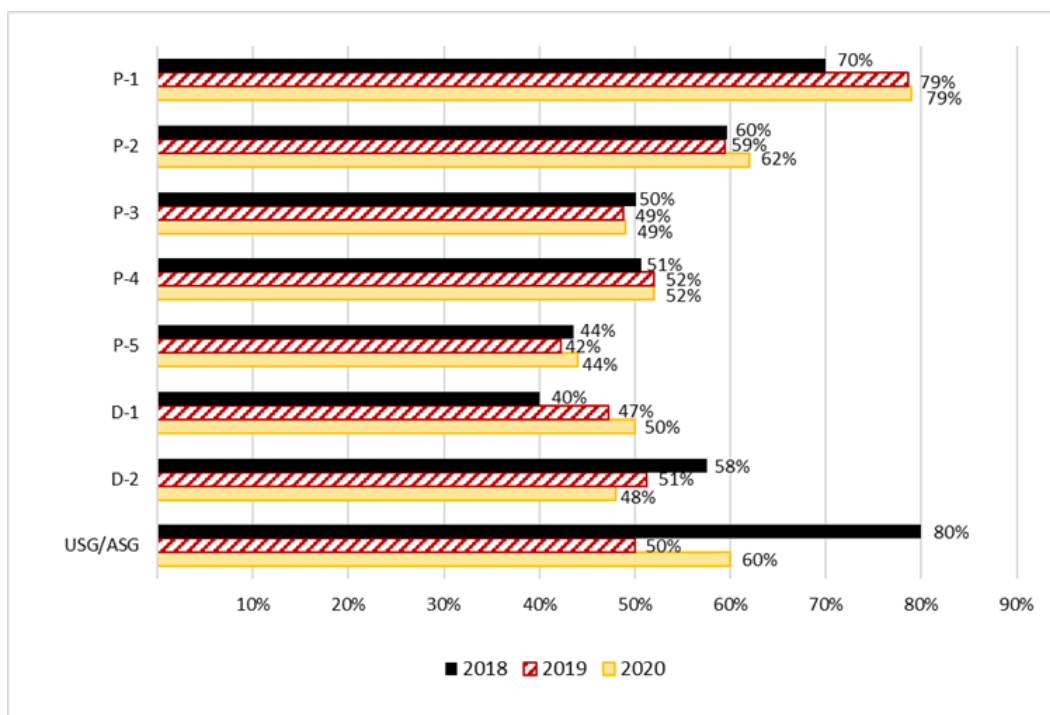
## B. Capacity and accountability on gender results

### 1. Gender capacity and gender parity

67. UNICEF achieved gender parity in staffing globally in 2020, with 48.4 per cent women and 51.6 per cent men, in line with “virtual parity” (53/47) in the United Nations System-wide Action Plan. Women hold 48 per cent of positions among professional staff, and 47 per cent among General Service staff. While there is parity at the P-4 level and above, gaps persist at the P-5 level, and in certain functional areas such as Information and Communications Technology (ICT), WASH, finance and operations. To address those gaps, in October 2020, UNICEF issued temporary special measures to achieve gender parity at the P-5 level, whereby preferential consideration is given to female candidates in the most unbalanced functional areas, and in the recruitment of external candidates in functional areas where internal talent is scarce among women. By year-end, the proportion of women at the P-5 level had risen from 42 per cent to 44 per cent, an encouraging development.

68. Country offices are using targeted talent outreach, improvements to workplace culture and building pipelines of female talent as strategies to recruit more women. Experiences in Nepal, where women from historically marginalized groups are being hired as paid trainees in an annual training programme, and Afghanistan, where a pool of female talent is being developed through national United Nations Volunteers, demonstrate how gender parity is being made an organizational priority.

Figure VI  
Percentage of female staff by level, 2018–2020



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

69. In response to the evaluation of the gender action plans in 2019, an independent review in 2020 of UNICEF gender capacity-building initiatives across organizational levels resulted in a new organization learning plan for gender equality, 2021–2025, which is meant to enhance existing capacity development; build competencies among all programme staff; and facilitate tailored learning for senior leadership. Other 2020 actions to advance capacity-building included creation of e-courses relating to adolescent girl programming, implementation of the CCCs and WASH interventions; new training assets to promote gender integration in emergency preparedness and response; and learning activities for gender-responsive programming, monitoring and advocacy connected to COVID-19. More than 1,200 UNICEF staff were engaged globally in these learning activities, complemented by region-specific efforts. By the end of 2020, staff in 75 per cent of UNICEF country offices had completed the GenderPro programme (the UNICEF globally accredited course on gender equality) or credentialing examination.

70. Nevertheless, while UNICEF continues to strengthen its gender architecture, including through building gender capacity, the pace remains slow. For example, although 33 country offices have at least one dedicated gender specialist (up from 30 in 2019), that number still represents only about one third of all country offices. Similarly, there are only 17 sectoral gender specialists at the country level, an increase of 3 from 2019, but representing just 13 per cent of all offices. Ongoing attention is needed to ensure that staffing guidance is consistently adhered to and that gender focal points receive more consistent support and training.

## 2. Organizational leadership and accountability

71. UNICEF is committed to implementing the United Nations System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity, including fostering an inclusive, gender-responsive workplace and organizational culture. From 2019 to 2020, concrete steps were taken

to address issues of workplace gender-related discrimination, harassment and abuse of authority, on the basis of findings from an independent review, staff surveys and forums. Measures included the adoption of a new competency framework to set standards of staff behaviour and revisions of policies regarding prohibited conduct and disciplinary processes to strengthen accountability, including zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse.

72. In 2020, UNICEF received Economic Dividends for Gender Equality (EDGE) recertification. An action plan will continue to address those areas over the next two years, as well as gender-equitable family policies and workplace sexual harassment. In response to the pandemic, adjustments included a rethinking of core working hours, the redefining of performance measurement, regular staff well-being and workload assessments and the sharing of management best practices on accommodating staff needs to balance personal and professional demands. In addition, building on its experience promoting flexible work modalities before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF co-led development of a United Nations model policy for flexible working arrangements in the High-Level Committee on Management.

## V. Lessons learned and the way forward

73. In the third year of implementation of the Gender Action Plan, progress on programmatic gender results overall was on a positive trajectory but remained uneven. In some critical areas, such as gender-based violence, harmful practices and girls' secondary education, the harrowing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to real risks of setbacks. Institutionally, constraints in capacity, accountability and practical application of gender integration at the country level are dampening more decisive advances in gender equality results.

74. Internal strategic reviews and an independent evaluation of the gender action plans in 2019 recommended critical steps forward, including highlighting programme areas with strategic advantage and potential for transformative change, and calling for more systematic accountability across the organization's decentralized structure so that the gender-equality agenda becomes "fully owned" across both programmatic work and organizational culture. In response, in 2020 UNICEF began to develop a new gender policy and action plan that embraces a more aspirational role for the organization as a global gender champion, and articulates a transformative, values-based approach to gender equality as fundamental to child rights.

75. Important lessons learned in the implementation of the gender action plans, the evaluation and the COVID-19 response will provide strategic direction for the new policy. For example, the strong performance by UNICEF on the United Nations System-wide Action Plan and the marked advances in such programme areas as MHH, 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, the flexibility of earmarked gender core resources and thematic funds has allowed innovation to flourish and catalyse solutions, as demonstrated by results relating to girls' skills and gender socialization. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the centrality of gender considerations in the humanitarian response. It has also revealed, however, opportunities to leverage the crisis to craft new approaches to address persistent gaps and underlying barriers; forge new or strengthen ongoing partnerships, including with women's and girls' groups; and enhance UNICEF workplace processes and culture.

76. UNICEF will continue to focus on accelerating results for women and girls, including through addressing the root causes of gender inequalities, by intensifying

investment, partnerships and cross-sectoral collaboration in (a) promoting adolescent girls' empowerment and well-being; (b) transforming gender-discriminatory norms; (c) ending gender-based violence in all settings; (d) driving more gender-responsive service delivery in health, education and WASH; and (e) strengthening gender data collection and analysis. UNICEF will continue to strengthen its organizational capacity and accountability for gender results, emphasizing field-level actions. The impact of COVID-19 cannot be understated: it will be a critical influence in the coming years on how UNICEF conducts business, whether in terms of intensifying or redefining the focus of programming priorities, or examining long-term shifts in the way it works, so that the organization emerges from this crisis stronger and better able to support every child in need.

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