



Rewriting the Narrative for the Second Decade with and for Adolescent Girls

Framework for South Asia
2022-2025

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Foreword

Adolescent girls are a powerful engine for transformational change.

Globally, there are an estimated 600 million adolescent girls aged 10–19. A third of them live in South Asia, making this the largest ever generation of female leaders, entrepreneurs, and change-makers. If this generation of adolescent girls is harnessed to its full potential, entire societies will be propelled forward.

Already today, girls are breaking barriers to foster a safer, healthier, fairer world. But while girls stand ready to help shape our collective future, they face a myriad of interlinked barriers on the way.

Today, we have a unique opportunity to give adolescent girls the freedom and power they need to lead and thrive. But their true potential can only be realized if they are supported to grow, learn and pursue their dreams — from the minute they are born through childhood, adolescence, and beyond.

In South Asia, more and more girls are going to school, fewer and fewer girls are getting married or becoming mothers, more and more girls' voices are being heard. But progress for girls has been uneven and far from equitable. This has been worsened by the compounding crises of climate change, COVID-19, and humanitarian conflict, which have worn away important gains made over the last decade. Investments in girls' rights remain limited, and girls continue to face barriers that keep them from fulfilling their potential, with girls with disabilities facing some of the greatest challenges.

Enabling and empowering adolescent girls is one of our top programming priorities in UNICEF South Asia. Building our ambitious global commitments – notably UNICEF's Strategic Plan 2022-2025, Gender Policy, and Gender Action Plan 2022-2030 - "Rewriting the narrative for second decade with and for adolescent girls" is UNICEF South Asia's attempt to set forth a framework for advancing our programming with and for adolescent girls.

The framework is intended to guide UNICEF's actions across the development, humanitarian, and peace nexus. It leverages our existing work and comparative advantage to promote more multisectoral, multi-level, context-specific, girl-driven, rights-based engagement that meets adolescent girls' diverse and overlapping needs. It calls for specific and targeted actions that promote adolescent girls' health, nutrition, learning and skills, including digital and employability skills, as well as protection against violence, exploitation, abuse, and harmful practices.

Together, let's commit to transformative action which places the rights, wellbeing, and leadership of adolescent girls at the very core of everything we do.

George Laryea-Adjei
UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia

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Abbreviations

AGC	Adolescent Girls' Circles
AGG	Adolescent Girls' Groups
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRC	Convention of the Rights of the Child
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/questioning, and other terms including Asexual, Non-Binary, Pan Sexual and Two-Spirit
MH	Mental Health
MHH	Menstrual Health Hygiene
MHM	Menstrual Hygiene Management
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MNO	Mobile Network Operator
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
SBCC	Social Behavioural Change Communication
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
STEM	Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics





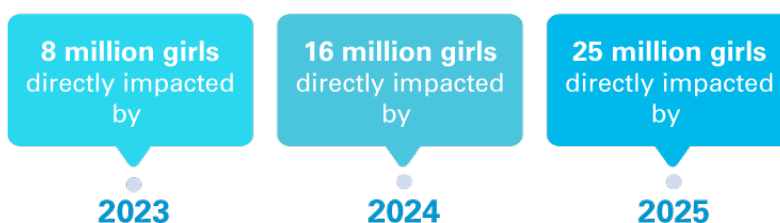
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Introduction

Adolescent girls in South Asia are emerging as leading voices for social change despite disadvantage, discrimination, and widespread neglect of their rights. While girls are taking actions to shape their collective future, multiple barriers and social norms continue to impact the quality of their environment, relationships and experiences, including access to information, services and the support they need.¹ For accelerating results to better support and positively impact adolescent girls in South Asia, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) commits to contribute towards better outcomes in terms of

- Health/nutrition
- Education and skilling
- Protection against violence and harmful practices including access to social protection

This strategy identifies scalable interventions that support adolescent girls to achieve their full potential leveraging UNICEF’s comparative advantage in development and humanitarian settings through strengthened partnerships with governments, civil society and the private sector. It also calls for investment in adolescent girls’ empowerment² and the scaling up of viable interventions to advance their rights and well-being. UNICEF ROSA will require USD 25 million over a three-year period to positively impact adolescent-girls in South Asia and create an enabling policy and community environment with increased access to adolescent-friendly services and leadership capacities so that they influence decisions that affect their lives. Together with partners, by 2025, 25 million (around 15% of the total population of adolescent girls 10-19 years of age)³ will be directly impacted through programming in South Asia.



1 Adolescent development and participation. Unicef.org. <https://www.unicef.org/adolescence>

2 UNICEF has identified four key components to support adolescents along their empowerment journey. These components are 1) promoting realisation, access and use of assets (which includes skills-building for accessing and utilising these assets); 2) increasing critical awareness, 3) fostering agency, and 4) enhancing opportunities for voice and participation., UNICEF Technical Note on Adolescent Empowerment

3 [Adolescent health dashboards country profiles - UNICEF DATA](#)

Why focus on adolescent girls?

One third of adolescent girls from around the world (166 millions out of 599 millions) live in South Asia.⁴ Human rights are protected in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), yet girls have not been able to realise their rights, largely because of gender-based discrimination justified by underlying gender norms and gendered power dynamics.⁵ Nevertheless, girls' lives in South Asia have been gradually improving in the past decades as they are breaking boundaries and barriers to lead and foster a safer, healthier and more prosperous life. They are taking lead in tackling issues like child marriage, educational inequality, violence, climate change, and inequitable access to healthcare. Supporting and equipping girls with the right resources and opportunities and fostering their empowerment can

help girls become the largest generation of female leaders, entrepreneurs and change-makers driving progress in their families, schools and communities.



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Key facts about adolescent girls in South Asia

- 3 in 10 girls are married before their 18th birthday.
- 1 in 5 girls give birth before they turn 18.
- Girls 10–14 years of age are more likely than boys of the same age to spend 21 or more hours on household chores per week.
- At least 1 in 5 ever-partnered girls between the ages of 15 and 19 in South Asia has experienced intimate partner violence.
- About 1 in 3 girls from poor households have never been to school.
- Girls are 3 times less likely to enrol in school than boys.
- Only 38 per cent of girls in South Asia are likely to complete upper secondary education.
- Nearly 1 in 4 adolescent girls 15–19 of years of age are neither in education, employment nor training compared to 1 in 10 boys of the same age (NEET).
- Unemployment ratio is 1:10 (boys: girls).
- South Asian average of vulnerable jobs is 73 percent of all jobs. The per cent share is higher for females than it is for males. 4 out of 5 jobs for females are vulnerable jobs..
- 55 per cent girls are anaemic. Only 20 to 40 percent of South Asian adolescent girls meet their recommended dietary intake.
- Adolescent birth rate is 26 births per 1000 live births for girls aged 15-19 years.
- Many girls report missing school for 1-3 days per month during their period.
- Girls and women are 5 times less likely to access phones than boys and men.

⁴ [Adolescent Data Portal | UNICEF Data](#)

⁵ United Nations Children's Fund, UN Women and Plan International, A New Era for Girls: Taking Stock of 25 Years of Progress, New York, 2020. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-new-era-for-girls-taking-stock-of-25-years-of-progress/>

Girls want equal rights and opportunities



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Adolescence is a period of life with specific health, developmental needs and protection⁶. However, girls' lives are impacted when they enter adolescence as their mobility becomes restricted to their home environment, limiting their access to information, education and services. Patriarchal norms, attitudes and practices get internalised early through gender socialisation processes impacting their feelings of self-worth and their expectations about their future. Media and advertisement reinforce gender norms, which further exacerbates the disparity between an adolescents' lived reality and their aspirations. Evidence shows that when girls are supported in becoming active agents in their own lives they take action in shifting norms that constrain them. For example, engagement in girls' clubs, life skills groups and links to education and economic skills has shown positive results as girls take a stand against child marriage, actively seek health information/ services and become advocates on issues that impact them.⁷

Girls want safety and freedom from violence

Unequal power relations place adolescent girls at higher risk of experiencing harmful traditional practices including child marriage and gender based violence⁸ which often increases during humanitarian crisis. Although the proportion of girls who were married before 18 years has declined in South Asia, it still stands at 30 percent today.⁹ Evidence shows that girls who are out of school are three times more likely to marry

before the age of 18 than boys in a similar situation and often face devastating consequences for their overall development, have limited career advancement and are at the risk of intimate partner violence.¹⁰ Regionally, around one in five ever-partnered girls between the age of 15 and 19 have experienced intimate partner violence.¹¹ LGBTIQ+ adolescents are often found to be facing higher risks of violence, discrimination and denial of access to services.¹²

Girls want to learn and earn



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Restricted mobility and lack of prioritisation of girls' higher education confine girls to their homes and exclude them from economic opportunities. Although girls' enrolment in primary education has increased in most parts of South Asia, the number of out of school girls still stands at 31 million girls. Girls are over four times more likely to be Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) than boys.¹³ Numerous entrenched factors underlie the challenges for adolescent girl's access to entrepreneurial skills that prevent them from finding work opportunities. Adolescent girls from vulnerable and excluded groups, including girls with disabilities or from ethnic minorities, face considerably more challenges to finding decent work in the formal sector. Adolescent girls and women working in the informal sector face greater risk of exploitation through low pay, gender-based violence and lack of professional progress.

6 World Health Organization (WHO). Health for the world's adolescents. A second chance in the second decade. <https://apps.who.int/adolescent/second-decade/section2/page1/recognizing-adolescence.html>

7 Technical Note on Gender Norms, <https://www.unicef.org/media/65381/file>

8 The framework will consider the broader intersectionality of Violence against Children (VAC) and Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) including Sexual Violence (SV) as the prevalence of SV is relatively high in most countries in the region.

9 UNICEF global databases, 2019, based on MICS, DHS and other nationally representative sources.

10 UNICEF. Child marriage - UNICEF DATA. (2022). <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>

11 United Nations Children's Fund, UN Women and Plan International, A New Era for Girls: Taking Stock of 25 Years of Progress, New York, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/media/65586/file/A-new-era-for-girls-2020.pdf>

12 Plan International (2020) Adolescent Programming Toolkit: Guidance and Tools for Adolescent Programming and Girls' Empowerment in Crisis Settings, United Kingdom: Plan International.

13 UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019. <https://uis.unesco.org/>

Girls want access to safe digital learning

Technology has opened up opportunities to learn new digital and transferable skills that prepare individuals for life and work,¹⁴ but girls continue to have limited access to devices and digital learning opportunities. Girls often face the risk of online abuse, which prevents them from learning to use digital technology in ways that benefit them.¹⁵ Additionally, attitudes and beliefs that dictate women and girls should not have access to mobile phones or the internet further create hindrance to developing their leadership in this sector.



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Girls want good physical and mental health

Adolescent girls are often denied choices, opportunities and have limited access to adolescent-friendly information and services, in particular related to SRHR, mental health and psychosocial support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the interlink between mental health, education opportunities and labour market integration became evident as adolescents who were deprived of education and employment opportunities were found to be twice as likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.

In South Asia, while fewer adolescent girls are becoming mothers today, they continue to face a heightened risk of adolescent pregnancy and anaemia. Some progress in reducing early childbearing has been observed, but the adolescent birth rate still stands at 26 births per 1,000 girls.¹⁶ One in five girls in South Asia continue to be moderately or severely underweight,¹⁷ which is often intrinsically related to gender dynamics in households and communities. Girls have limited knowledge about the changes occurring in their bodies and are often deprived of the necessary facilities and supplies to manage their menstruation.

Adolescent girls are taking lead as change-makers and leaders of tomorrow

Adolescent girls have a pivotal role to play in shifting social norms and influence policy frameworks. Most often, girls lack space and an enabling environment to speak out on issues that affect them and to make their voices heard. When girls are provided with safe spaces and real world learning opportunities, they can take charge of their lives and take leadership in finding solutions to the challenges they face.



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**GENERATION
EQUALITY**

As a co-lead of the Generation Equality **Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation**, UNICEF, alongside its partners, committed to the following actions over the period 2021-2026:

- I. Design sustainable financing mechanisms and leverage impact investing to close the gender digital divide and end gender-based violence.
- II. Invest in knowing more about girls' and young women's digital realities and supporting the learning solutions they design, fit for their digital world.
- III. Use technology as a solution to address gender-based violence.

14 United Nations Children's Fund, UN Women and Plan International, A New Era for Girls: Taking Stock of 25 Years of Progress, New York, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/new-era-for-girls-2020>

15 Background Paper: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality Closing the digital divide for girls, UNICEF

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.



Investment in adolescent girls has ripple effect across generations

There is a need to invest in multi-sectoral and integrated programmes that are truly transformative and can promote both girls wellbeing and leadership. Lessons from UNICEF's work to date and other successful programmes show the potential of amplifying adolescent girls' leadership through their meaningful engagement in programmes while simultaneously improving health, nutrition, education, protection and other outcomes.

Studies have shown that investments in adolescent girls' potential increases economic dividends and yields high returns to girls, their families and communities. Every additional year of schooling for a girl increases her future earnings by up to 20 percent and investments in sexual and reproductive health and rights reduces maternal deaths by two-thirds, new-born deaths by more than three-quarters and eliminating anaemia increases economic productivity by up to 17 percent.¹⁹ Investing in adolescents leads to improvement in their overall well-being, rights and empowerment; increases productivity in their future lives and has pivotal influence on their next generations.²⁰

"Equipped with the right resources and opportunities, the regions' 166 million adolescent girls can become the largest generations of female leaders, entrepreneurs and change makers"¹⁸

A total investment of just USD \$1.53 per day per girl in emerging economies would have a huge impact on countries overall economic potential for example, economies that achieve 100% secondary school completion rates for girls by 2030 could see their GDP being boosted by an average of 10%²¹

18 CARE's Work with Adolescents and Youth, 2022

19 Walters D, Kakietek J, Dayton Eberwein J, Shekar M. 2017. An Investment Framework for Meeting the Global Nutrition Target for Anemia. Washington (DC): World Bank Group; 2017

20 WHO. Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!): guidance to support country implementation. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2017. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/255415/9789241512343-eng.pdf>

21 UNICEF 2022, Building back equal, with and for adolescent girls: programme strategy

Long term dividends of investing in adolescent girls

- Delayed marriage and pregnancy
- Improved health, nutrition, and wellbeing for adolescent girls and their families
- Greater engagement of adolescent girls in decision making at all levels
- Greater societal recognition of girls rights
- More efficient health systems
- Decreased poverty
- Increased intergenerational prosperity
- Increased lifetime earnings
- Increased productivity
- Higher GDP
- More peaceful and equitable societies
- Equal access to services for all
- More lives saved

UNICEF's current programmes for and with adolescent girls: what works for girls in south asia?

UNICEF places a particular emphasis on supporting girls during adolescence as they have the potential to become leaders, yet are disproportionately affected by gender inequality. UNICEF's Gender Action Plan (GAP),

2022–2025 has also identified promotion of the rights of adolescents and explicitly recognises programmatic outcomes for:

- Adolescent girls' well-being and empowerment through targeted priorities;
- Gender equitable results across all goal areas for all adolescents through integrated priorities; and
- Sustainable transformative systems that equitably promote the rights of all adolescents.

UNICEF ROSA has also committed to advancing adolescent girls' rights in line with the GAP 2022-2025 through gender transformative²² and targeted investments to unlock the potential and build leadership

of girls. Several regional and country level initiatives in partnership with other UN agencies, governments and the private sector have shown positive results for adolescent girls in South Asia.

²² Gender transformative programme explicitly seeks to redress gender inequalities, remove structural barriers and empower disadvantaged population.

Examples of girl-intentional programming

- **Skills4Girls** Initiative in Bangladesh supported completion of secondary education and smooth transition to employment through Alternative Learning Program (ALP) and apprenticeship to out-of-school adolescent girls.
- **AdhaFULL** in India used a multi-media initiative to challenge discriminatory norms and stereotypes covering adolescent health, child marriage, education, nutrition, and gender- all of which directly affect adolescents' self-perceptions and how they critically interpreted gender roles. Substantially, more gender equitable beliefs, and intentions to behave in non-stereotypical ways and challenge constraining norms among both boys and girls who watched AdhaFULL than among non-viewers and change in parents' attitudes and behavior were observed.
- **Rupantaran** in Nepal supported prevention of child marriage and strengthened girl's access to, retention and performance in secondary education. It equipped girls with information on issues around gender inequality - including child marriage, reproductive health, violence, nutrition, communication, decision making and negotiation skills using different platforms (Adolescent Girls' Groups (AGG) and Adolescent Girls' Circles (AGC)). It also worked with teachers, parents and religious leaders to tackle traditional gender norms. Training is provided for the girls' parents to encourage them to create a better living environment for their daughters.
- **Beti Padhau Beti Bachau (BPBB)** in Nepal aimed at reducing child marriage and violence against girls. The programme focused on increasing education and employability of girls through education insurance which was linked to birth registrations and a fixed deposit scheme. Distribution of bicycles helped girls to get to school and the program was able to increase awareness on the value of girls.
- **Digital Transformation for Education KOICA Project** in Sri Lanka developed 'Teaching with technology' skills of teachers; implemented a safe online platform in schools for learning and school management; introduced technology based self-learning tools for girls/boys; laid the foundation for SMART schools and equipped girls/boys with multiple learning options for developing their 21st century skills.
- **Spotlight Initiative** in Afghanistan focused on the most at-risk groups to accelerate efforts towards the elimination of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and harmful practices (HP). Life-saving information and services- health, nutrition, protection and life skills, GBV services, psychosocial, first aid for caregivers, referrals, management of sexual violence and mental health were provided through Women and Girls Friendly Spaces (WGFSs). Services and distribution of dignity kits were carried out through Multi-Purpose Adolescent Groups (MAGs), and Adolescent and Youth Networks (AYN). Elder women acted as volunteers/mentors and role models to adolescent girls who were mobilised together with female front line workers for community dialogues.
- **UNICEF and Generation Unlimited (GenU) - Passport to Earning (P2E)** in India aims to provide job relevant skills, through Microsoft's Community Training platform to the most disadvantaged youth, including adolescent girls. The P2E platform provides skills and certificates for employment and entrepreneurship, while connecting young people with coaching, mentoring, apprenticeship, and employment opportunities.
- **OKY Innovation** in India and Nepal is a Girl-centred application for menstruation tracking that empowers adolescent girls to manage their menstrual cycle with confidence and builds positive social norms around menstruation. It provides evidence-based information in girl-friendly, accessible language in fun ways, improving girls' ability to track and plan for their periods, and it dispels myths and misinformation.
- **Life Skills Project-Deepshika in India** Encouraged the formation of self-help groups along with imparting life skills training to adolescent girls, with the dual aim of reducing child-marriage and re-enrolling girls who had dropped out of school. Impact on gender knowledge and attitudes was strongly evident within communities and several adolescent girls were elected into local self-governance bodies, some heading their gram panchayats, and actively participating in family level decision making.
- **Accelerated Education Programme (AEP)** in Pakistan aims to provide access to quality learning at the AEP centre specifically for girls who have never been enrolled in a school before leading to their transition to and mainstreaming from lower secondary grades in public schools. It features play-based curricular and extra-curricular activities, sports and community engagement to promote positive attitude towards girls' education.



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Multisectoral interconnected programming for accelerated results with and for adolescent girls

UNICEF is a leading force for adolescent girls in the multilateral system. It is time for UNICEF to step up to act more boldly and comprehensively than ever before.

1 Centering girls' voice, agency and leadership for transformative change

for addressing vulnerabilities; engaging with them meaningfully and safely, providing safe spaces, mentorship and leadership development for enhancing their capacity to make informed decisions about their lives. Selected actions²³ may include:

- a. Supporting adolescent girls-driven and adolescent girl led space and processes to increase voice and participation.
- b. Advocating for formulation and effective implementation of laws, policies, practices and budgets that institutionalise adolescent girls' participation in different settings.
- c. Enhancing positive gender norms and attitudes concerning the rights and capacity of adolescent girls.

To fulfil its commitments on adolescent girls, UNICEF will employ the following multi sectoral, multi-faceted, interconnected approaches:

2 Promoting multi-faceted, multisectoral, interconnected approaches and increasing

investments to achieve positive results for girls. This roadmap seeks to address some of the most urgent challenges of adolescent girls in South Asia across three main areas of focus:

- a. Health and nutrition; including Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH), Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) prevention and mental health.
- b. Adolescent girls' access to quality education and skills development (including skills for employment and digital skills)
- c. Protection from violence, abuse, and exploitation as well as harmful practices and access to social protection.

This approach will break away from the programmatic silos, single thematic sector focus and inter-connected ways to holistically address underlying barriers and root causes restricting adolescent girls from reaching their full potential.

23 UNICEF. Adolescent Empowerment: Technical note. UNICEF <https://www.unicef.org/media/101901/file/Adolescent%20Empowerment%20Technical%20Note.pdf>

3 Strengthening shared value partnerships, including with girl-led networks and organisations

at all levels, including families, communities, governments, network of female judiciary, the private sector including Mobile Network Operators(MNOs) and advertisement/film industries and civil society by fostering well-resourced policies that contribute to sustained shifts in gender norms and protection/promotion of the rights of adolescent girls. Partnerships with adolescent girl-led groups will further strengthen their network and enhance their collective voice and leadership. Additionally, working with goodwill ambassadors, girls' champions, role models, advocates

and prominent personalities from the worlds of art, music, film, sport and more can help raise awareness and mobilize support to reach the most disadvantaged adolescents girls. UNICEF can play an important convening role, forming context relevant platforms that can bring many of these stakeholders together with decision makers and funders, and enable structured and meaningful participation of adolescent girls and girl-led networks in decision making.

Cross cutting components

- Intersectional lens
- Working in humanitarian and development settings
- Social Norms Change
- Meaningful and systematic adolescent girls' participation



4 Generating quality data and evidence

by investing in data and evidence generation in less known areas around girls; strengthening disaggregated data collection, particularly data on marginalised girls and supporting girl-led surveys and studies to bring in the perspectives of adolescent girls to inform programming at different levels. Supporting governments and

other partners to collect nationally/sub nationally representative data on adolescents to understand the extent and drivers of different forms of deprivation to inform the design of policies and programmes and for testing innovative approaches to address deprivations impacting girls including in unreached areas.

Cross-cutting components across all approaches

1 Using Intersectional Lens for addressing differential vulnerabilities that manifest and are made worse due to differences based on factors such as disability, caste, religion, ethnicity, living with HIV/AIDS, LGBTQ+ and others. This approach will support in understanding how these multiple aspects of girls' social position and political identities intersect and create differential vulnerabilities and privilege and deprive specific groups of adolescents from access to basic services and social protection measures, expose them to increased risk of violence, limit their financial inclusion, wellbeing, voice and decision-making capacity.²⁴ Further, it will inform actions to transform inequalities by working with the most vulnerable to co-create actions for change.

2 Adolescent girls - responsive humanitarian action to address the heightened risks of adolescents' well-being, safety and dignity during crisis settings. Girls from marginalised groups face higher risk of violence, discrimination and denial of access to services. Hence, recognising girl specific vulnerabilities and needs before, during and after crises and identifying multisectoral interventions, strengthening frontline response - including girls' leadership - to identify and mitigate risks and their access to required services and support.

3 Social protection is highly relevant to the agenda of adolescent girls in the region. Social protection can help create enabling conditions for adolescent girls to realize their aspirations and rights allowing them to thrive. The strategy will promote opportunities to link adolescent girls to social protection services; it will also be an entry point to link girls to other services. The strategy will support redesigning programmes to maximize the inclusion and empowerment of girls, particularly the most excluded and invisible ones. To this end, UNICEF will explore integrated social protection measures, with their focus on girls vulnerabilities, CASH plus elements, coordination and alignment of various forms of social support both in the public and private sphere, and outreach efforts in ways that enable acceleration of girls' rights. Good practice is to ensure that the views and needs of adolescent girls are incorporated in social protection programmes by providing meaningful opportunities for girls' involvement and feedback.

4 Social norms change will also be at the core of the strategy for the roadmap and will use innovative Social and Behavioural Change Communications (SBCC) approaches including interpersonal and community engagement, and the media, community engagement and others for intended transformative change. It should be underscored that change is not limited to communities and families, but also consider institutions and systems, which often perpetuate gender inequalities. Additionally, systematic engagement of men and boys will create enabling environment and space for exercising positive masculinities and breaking constraining gender stereotypes.



© UNICEF/JN0658495/Mukut

24 Narayan, P. (2021). Annotated bibliography: The intersecting norms of gender and caste in South Asia. ALIGN (Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms). https://www.alignplatform.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/intersecting_norms_-_south_asia.pdf

Adolescent girls' empowerment²⁵ accelerator

The Theory of Change below emphasizes the need for an integrated approach for making a positive impact on adolescent girls' lives, particularly improvements in their nutrition, health, learning, civic participation, protection, and awareness of rights. The roadmap proposes adolescent girls-intentional focus with girls at the centre of programmes and policies that are designed to respond to their aspirations and realities, and to promote

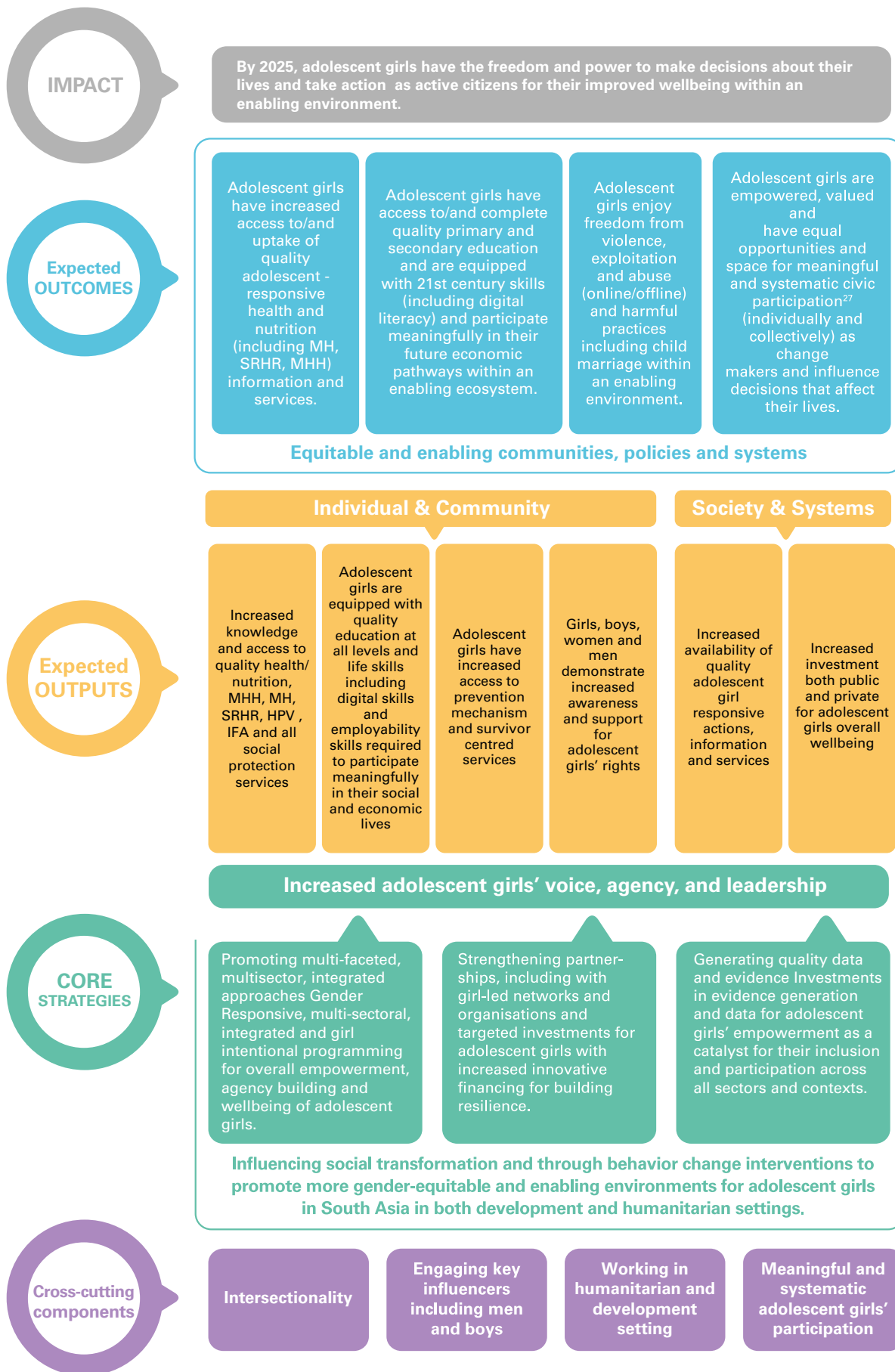
and recognise their empowerment and agency. The 'Empowerment' dimension will represent the dynamic and interconnected nature of the four components of the empowerment concept – assets, critical awareness, agency and voice and participation- that taken together enhance adolescents' abilities to make informed choices and negotiate a safe transition to adulthood.



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²⁵ Empowerment represents the dynamic and interconnected nature of the four components of empowerment – assets, critical awareness, agency and voice and participation- that taken together enhance adolescents' abilities to make informed choices and negotiate a safe transition to adulthood. Fostering empowerment can lead to improved development outcomes and realisation of adolescent girls' rights. Technical Note Adolescent Empowerment, UNICEF

Theory of change



26 Meaningful participation builds adolescents' self-confidence and self-efficacy as their views are heard and taken seriously. This empowers adolescents to claim other rights. Through their participation, adolescents can improve the delivery of adolescent-friendly services, influence laws and policies, hold duty-bearers accountable and increase their collective ability to defend their rights.

Strategic priorities and actions

The strategic priorities emphasise work at multiple levels (Socio-ecological model)²⁷ to foster adolescent girls' empowerment. At the **Individual level**, the investments in adolescent girls will enhance their access to and control over resources, opportunities and assets, including development of life skills and leadership. At the **Interpersonal/Community level**, it will focus on addressing gender norms, and power relations to create an enabling environment for girls. At the **Policy/institutional Change** (System and Policies) level, gender responsive policy and budgetary reforms will increase girls' wellbeing by increasing access to quality and dignified service delivery. To address the most urgent challenges that adolescent girls face across the three priority areas of health and nutrition; education and learning; and protection, customised action based on local context will be scaled up. Priority is given to actions based on indicators that are lagging behind; and on interventions that will bring quick wins and have a multiplier effect. Committing to more deliberate and integrated actions can help to tackle the underlying barriers that limit progress for greater impact.

Programmatic actions in each sector can include:



1 Health and Nutrition

Health and nutrition services for adolescents are often highly fragmented, poorly coordinated and uneven in quality. Social norms and attitudes related to nutrition (such as the practice of women and girls eating last and the least) and early marriage often have a negative effect on girls' nutrition in South Asia leading to poor nutritional outcomes as the majority (60–80 percent) do not meet the recommended dietary intake. Moreover, their access to the health system might be compromised especially during and after pregnancy, which is a risk factor for their nutritional deprivation.²⁸ Often, primary care services are compromised because of perceived lack of respect, privacy and confidentiality, fear of stigma

and discrimination, and the imposition of moral values by health-care providers. While access to antenatal services has increased throughout the region, the coverage of essential nutrition interventions has been slow to improve.²⁹ Improving outcomes for adolescent girls, especially within the health and nutrition sectors requires multisectoral solutions that addresses the underlying causes of malnutrition and improved policies, strategies and plans to reach adolescent girls.

Programmatic actions may include:

i. Adolescent-friendly health services

(screening, age-appropriate information and services)

- **Increasing health screening for early detection and treatment** and providing quality and high nutrition impact interventions including iron/ folic acid supplements and MHH supplies for girls through existing platforms: school, girls' clubs, safe spaces and others to prevent anaemia and malnutrition (adolescence, preconception and pregnancy)
- **Promoting age-appropriate health services** including mental health and non-judgmental SRHR to adolescent girls at risk of depression, including pregnant and parenting adolescents, and GBV survivors
- **Providing adolescent girls with information on nutrition** (healthy diets, physical activity, body positivity and adolescent-specific health messages through different mediums including digital platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, or U-Report, that girls are already using.³⁰ Additionally, SRHR, MHH information can be provided through digital applications like Oky. They can be customised based on the context with alternative low tech solution options with simple phones, Interactive Voice Response; free data package, Zero-Rating contents and others. and other edutainment options.

ii. Addressing discriminatory norms, attitudes and practices

in relation to adolescent health and nutrition through a range of information campaigns and community awareness, including inter-generational dialogues, engagement of influencers, men and boys, girl advocates, religious leaders for improving access to safe and affordable nutritious foods, nutrition services and positive nutrition practices in early childhood and adolescence.

27 The socio-ecological model combines interventions that effect change at different levels from Individual-Interpersonal-Community-System/ Institution-Policy/Legislative

28 Tebaldi, R. and C. Bilo. 2019. Gender and social protection in South Asia: an assessment of the design of non-contributory programmes. Brasilia and Kathmandu: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth and UNICEF Regional Office South Asia <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/10046/file/Gender%20and%20social%20protection%20in%20South%20Asia%20.pdf>

29 UNICEF. Adolescent and women's nutrition. <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/nutrition/adolescent-and-womens-nutrition>

30 Where adolescent girls' access to these platforms remains limited, particularly for the poorest or most marginalised girls, interpersonal communication or social mobilisation through non-digital communication channels will be more effective.

iii. Linking vulnerable girls with Social Protection services (conditional or unconditional cash transfers/insurance) to increase food security, improve health, and nutrition.

iv. Strengthening policies, system and budget to delay the age of marriage to avoid adolescent pregnancy and evidence generation on barriers and drivers of adolescent malnutrition and health to improve system, coverage and accountability of service provision to vulnerable adolescent girls.

2 Education and Skilling

Gender disparities in access to quality education for adolescent girls remain another prevalent issue in South Asia. It is inherently linked to pervasive socio-cultural gender bias in the region. Although the school enrolment gap has been improving, in some countries, girls are still disadvantaged when it comes to equal opportunities in the labour market mostly due to social norms, gender discrimination and unequal burden of reproductive work at home. Girls encounter more barriers to the transition from school to work and end up in the most vulnerable segments of informal employment, receiving low, irregular or no cash returns, and they are subject to a high level of job insecurity.³¹



Girls' retention in secondary education opens opportunities to pursue higher education and results in improvements in their overall health, well-being, and earnings. Schools link girls with services such as health promotion and MHH and they provide protective measures against child marriage.³² Although school is often the first place where children are introduced to technology as well as learning literacy and numeracy skills to make the most of these digital tools, girls still lack access to these opportunities. Even in instances where girls have digital access, they encounter online harassment, cyber-bullying and privacy risks.³³ Factors that need to be addressed to close the gender

digital gaps can be broadly categorised into three interlinked areas: access, digital literacy, and online safety³⁴ contextualised as appropriate (from no-tech to low-tech to high-tech).

Programmatic actions may include:

i. Promoting retention of girls in school

and their smooth transition to the labour market by addressing social and systemic barriers, working with school management, parents and caregivers to increase access of girls to learning opportunities including digital literacy and skilling.

ii. Strengthening supportive platforms including Adolescent Girls' Groups (AGG) and Adolescent Girls' Circles (AGC) in which girls create a positive peer pressure to stay in school, help each other advocate with parents against child marriage, and build networks.

iii. Promoting girl-led skills building initiatives that link girls both in and out of schools with mentors and peer support networks, as well as job training/ career counselling/internship opportunities within labour markets for decent work either through waged or self-employment.

iv. Linking vulnerable girls with social protection/insurance schemes through gender-responsive cash plus/cash transfer programmes or skills for employability and programmes with peer mentors on future planning including family-centred cash transfers and/or referrals to livelihoods activities and financial access/saving schemes.

v. Expanding innovative approaches like UPSHIFT and Skill4Girls with participatory feedback tools such as U-Report and the Adolescent Kit to help girls smooth transition from school to employability.

vi. Promoting alternative pathway and digital offline learning platforms, for girls in vulnerable settings to support accelerated and continued learning opportunities and digital skills.

vii. Strengthening and expanding partnerships, including with girl led networks

- Engaging with key stakeholders to influence positive gender representation in media, increase girls access to Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) education through innovative SBCC including digital messaging, digital learning packages and gamification options.³⁵
- Forming strategic and shared value partnerships with private sector, including MNO, for affordable access to digital technologies, including devices,

31 <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/10046/file/Gender%20and%20social%20protection%20in%20South%20Asia%20.pdf>

32 UNICEF. Building back equal with and for adolescent Girls: a Programme Strategy for UNICEF 2022-2025

33 Chowdhury, A., & Binder, G. What we know about the gender digital divide for girls: A literature review. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/8311/file/What%20we%20know%20about%20the%20gender%20digital%20divide%20for%20girls:%20A%20literature%20review>.

34 Ibid.

35 Where adolescent girls' access to these platforms remains limited, particularly for the poorest or most marginalised girls, interpersonal communication or social mobilisation through non-digital communication channels will be more effective.

internet and connectivity³⁶ as well as identifying and developing labour-market relevant skills and strengthening systems that result in improved school to work transition for adolescent girls.

- c. Promoting adolescent girl led organisations, school councils, advisory boards, and others., to strengthen girls collective power to defend their rights and linking local, regional or national networks of adolescent girl groups for civic engagement and mutual learning.

3 Protection from violence, abuse, exploitation and harmful practices



Adolescent girls face unique risks of violence as a result of intersecting inequalities based on gender, age, sexual identity, social class, caste and ethnicity and others. Discriminatory norms, devaluing of girls and acceptability of violence create conditions that increase the chances of interpersonal violence³⁷ and often prevents seeking help, due to fear of bringing shame on their families. The risk of experiencing violence for adolescent girls is heightened in situations of crisis where they are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, exploitation and early marriage. Child marriage results in grave violation of girls' rights, depriving them of their decision-making over their own bodies, resulting in early pregnancy, school drop-out and it puts them at further risk of domestic violence. Prevention and response to gender-based violence including child marriage, requires a holistic and multi-sectoral response, including safe spaces that are some ways to access life-saving support.

Programmatic actions may include;

i. Providing Safe Spaces, including virtual spaces, for prevention of violence, , adolescent responsive services and building social relations with peers., as well as referrals to survivor-centred specialised services

ii. Strengthening GBV prevention, response and referral pathways/mechanism by engaging community and service providers for prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse and promoting enabling environments and safe channels for reporting and accessing support. (both online/offline platforms, including through digital technology.

iii. Identifying and promoting role models, goodwill ambassadors and champions among religious leaders as powerful voices against prevention of GBV including child marriage.

iv. Changing attitudes, behaviour and practices through edutainment and reflective community-based dialogues to challenge norms relating to child marriage including systems for regular engagement with the community to promote positive masculinity.

v. Scaling up multi-sectoral interventions and partnership for a more holistic response including social protection, linkage to livelihood opportunities.

Measuring results

To best capture the full range of results through the multisectoral, interconnected approaches described here, the strategy defines milestones over a period of 3 years (Annex B).

Reporting will be annually for the target countries using the results framework with the defined milestones. It will enable UNICEF, governments and stakeholders to track changes across the programmatic pillars over time, serving as a tool to monitor progress and inform programmatic, resource, and policy decisions. In coordination with UNICEF's advocacy and communications teams and resource mobilization teams, governments, donors, civil society, the media, and other actors to the continuing needs of adolescent girls.

In addition to measuring progress for adolescent girls at the country level, UNICEF will hold itself accountable for the success of this strategy and its objectives. Change will be measured by the number of country offices that are supporting, funding, implementing, advocating for, and demonstrating progress on multisectoral, girl-focused programming. Each year, examples of successful multisectoral programmes for adolescent girls amongst UNICEF offices will be recognized, documented and rewarded. The strategy also supports data and evidence generation for adolescent girls in the region. To promote cross learning, knowledge platforms will be created including regular webinars and a Community of Practice (CoP).

36 Provision of devices needs to ensure accountability on safe use and maintenance. (for example, through school, safe spaces, adolescent/school clubs, girls circle) for learning continuity, discussing adolescent girls' specific issues and advancing basic computer skills. Mentorship programme for girls who are interested to pursue careers in coding can be explored through existing Innovation labs.

37 <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/10046/file/Gender%20and%20social%20protection%20in%20South%20Asia%20.pdf>

Annex A: Situation of Adolescent Girls by Country, South Asia

	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	South Asia
Demographics									
Total Population of Adolescent Girls (in millions)	4.7	15.1	0.07	119.34	0.03	3.1	21.58	1.68	166
Health and Nutrition									
Adolescent Birth Rate (Per 1000 girls age 15-19)	62	74	59	12	9	63	54	21	26
Adolescent Mortality Rate (15-19 years)	14	6	5	4	2	4	6	2	5
Overweight among adolescents	9	8	9	6	14	7	99	11	7
Thinness among Adolescent girls (%)	11	13	11	22	13	10	14	13	19
Education and Skilling									
Adolescent Girls Drop out of Upper Secondary School	69	36	22	48	32	13		13	-
Protection from violence, abuse, and exploitation as well as harmful practices									
Girls married before 18 years	28.3	51.4	25.8	23.3	2.2	32.8	18.3	9.8	28
Demand for family planning satisfied with modern methods (%)	20.8	71.3	52.4	26.9	9.5	29.5	23.3	57.8	41.5

<https://data.unicef.org/resources/adolescent-health-dashboard-regional-profiles/>

Note: Base line data is based on the Box 1: Key Facts on Adolescent Girls and [Adolescent health dashboards country profiles - UNICEF DATA](#)

Annex B: Outcome Indicators

Priority Area	Indicators list
<p>Health and Nutrition Outcome 1 Adolescent girls' have increased access to/and uptake of quality adolescent responsive health and nutrition including MH, SRHR, MHH, HPV, IFA information and services and access to social protection .</p>	<p>i. Adolescent birth rate (births per 1,000 girls 15-19)</p> <p>ii. Percentage of anaemia in girls</p>
<p>Education and Skilling Outcome 2: Adolescent girls have access to quality secondary level learning and skills building opportunities</p>	<p>i. Girls' completion rate, lower secondary (%)</p> <p>ii. Girls' completion rate, upper secondary (%)</p> <p>iii. Not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (girls 15-19) (%)</p>
<p>Protection from violence, abuse, and exploitation as well as harmful practices Outcome: 3 Adolescent girls enjoy freedom from violence, exploitation, and abuse (online/ offline) and harmful practices including child marriage within an enabling environment.</p>	<p>i. Child Marriage before 18 (%)</p> <p>ii. Intimate partner violence prevalence (girls 15-19) (%)</p>

Annex C: Output Indicators

Priority Area	Indicators list
<p>Health and Nutrition</p> <p>Output: Girls have increased access to survivor-centered services, and benefit from violence and harmful practice prevention programmes</p>	I. No of adolescent girls received iron/folic acid supplementation
	II. Number of adolescent girls reached whose menstrual health and hygiene needs are addressed through UNICEF-supported programmes
	III. Number of adolescent girls received HPV vaccination
	IV. Number of adolescent girls linked to social protection through UNICEF-Supported interventions
	V. Number of countries integrating adolescent health priorities, including sexual and reproductive health, mental health in primary health-care services or through school and digital platforms
<p>Education and Skilling</p> <p>Output: Increased mechanisms for adolescent girls to have opportunities to share their voice and be able to influence decisions that affect their lives'</p>	I. Number of girls who participated in skills development programmes for learning, personal empowerment, active citizenship and/or employability through UNICEF-supported programmes
	II. Number of girls accessed education through digital platforms through UNICEF-supported programmes
	III. Number of countries institutionalizing holistic skills development for adolescent girls to support learning, personal empowerment, environmental sustainability, active citizenship and/or employability and entrepreneurship

Priority Area	Indicators list
<p>Protection from violence, abuse, and exploitation as well as harmful practices</p> <p>Output: (a) Girls have increased access to survivor-centered services, and benefit from violence and harmful practice prevention programmes</p>	<p>I. Number of adolescent girls receiving prevention and care interventions to address child marriage, through UNICEF-supported programmes</p>
	<p>II. Number of adolescent girls provided with community-based mental health and psychosocial support services</p>
	<p>III. Number of countries implementing evidence-based, costed, and funded action plans or strategies with monitoring and evaluation frameworks to end child marriage</p>
	<p>IV. Number of adolescent girls provided with risk mitigation, prevention, and response interventions to address gender-based violence through UNICEF- supported programmes</p>
<p>Output: (b) Increased mechanisms for adolescent girls to have opportunities to share their voice and be able to influence decisions that affect their lives'</p>	<p>I. Number of adolescent girls who participate in or lead civic engagement initiatives, through UNICEF-supported programmes</p>
	<p>II. Number of countries engaging children, adolescents and young people (especially girls) in action and advocacy to address climate change, unsustainable energy use and/or environmental degradation, with UNICEF support</p>

Note: Base line data is based on the Box 1: Key Facts on Adolescent Girls and [Adolescent health dashboards country profiles - UNICEF DATA](#)



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