WHAT WORKS FOR GIRLS IN SOUTH ASIA:
A SITUATION ANALYSIS

UNICEF South Asia

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for every child

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Acronyms

AEP	Accelerated Education Programme
ALP	Alternative Learning Pathway
CEFM	Child, Early and Forced Marriage
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GATE	Girls' Access to Education
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex Plus
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

A group of adolescent girls who are middle school students read and enjoy comic series.

Executive summary

South Asia has seen enormous progress in adolescent girls' rights, leadership and wellbeing. However, this progress has been uneven across countries and communities. Millions of adolescent girls in South Asia still face numerous barriers to accessing and utilizing the basic services they need for growth and wellbeing. Sadly, many girls bear a still greater burden, in having to provide unremunerated care services within households. The impact of polycrisis in our region is making the situation of girls worse.

Working with and for adolescent girls is a key programming accelerator for UNICEF in the region. UNICEF is committed to advancing adolescent girls' rights and well-being through gender-transformative programming to unlock the potential and build leadership of girls across the region.

❯ Our study focus

The case for prioritizing interventions that demonstrate impact on the wellbeing and leadership of girls

This study focuses on the emerging needs of adolescent girls in South Asia in order to better tailor programmes to, and nurture the leadership and agency of, adolescent girls. It reviews interventions and approaches that are known to have the greatest potential efficacy in supporting adolescent girls' health and wellbeing. It also outlines the essential components of effective interventions, specific elements that are working well and are impactful, gaps in current programming and recommendations for future strategies and interventions.

❯ Our findings

The application of gender-transformative approaches must be strengthened

There is a growing body of evidence on the potential for gender-transformative programming to improve adolescent wellbeing.

Our findings show that, though investment in targeted programming for girls is necessary, this can only be the first step. Programmes in the South Asia region use a combination of strategies to achieve norms change, including safe spaces, media and public education campaigns, intergenerational and community dialogues, peer education, mentorship, parenting programmes and digital campaigns, among others. Changing norms is notoriously difficult to achieve or measure in short-term programmes as it requires ongoing, sustained and flexible investments in the grassroots networks, organizations and advocates that make up a movement for equality.

Many existing programmes and interventions struggle to adopt a targeted, gender-transformative approach for girls.

UNICEF and partners need to fully apply gender-transformative approaches to programming for adolescent girls, that address the underlying the systematic drivers of gender inequality and discrimination.

Interventions for girls are less common, less prioritized

Our findings reveal that, despite some interventions demonstrating reach to girls in South Asia, there is still a long way to go

towards meeting the commitments of the global strategy and ensuring girls are prioritized and intentionally targeted. Programmes specifically targeting adolescent girls are less common and are concentrated within specific goals and funding streams, such as the UNICEF-UNFPA Joint Programme to End Child Marriage. Mainstream programmes that reach girls have significant gaps in analysis on the challenges and needs specific to girls. High-level political commitment to girls' development is widespread, but implementation is stalled by a lack of funding, resources or capacity.

Girls from marginalized communities are not adequately reached

There is no clear evidence that adolescent girls' programmes are consistently, systematically and successfully reaching adolescent girls in marginalized communities across South Asia. In particular, there is a lack of intentional programmes in some countries to reach girls in geographically remote areas, girls experiencing stigmatization or discrimination due to sexual orientation, girls belonging to ethnic and religious minorities, married girls and girls who are parenting.

More investment is needed in approaches to support adolescent girls' agency, skills and empowerment

Most UNICEF and partner programming in the region has as a specific objective, the empowerment of girls, adolescents or young people, while still more work with girls and other adolescents to build life and digital skills, as well as other skills such as for employment, livelihoods. Four approaches are particularly widely used in such programmes: 1) the use of safe spaces for girls to deliver peer support, skills development and mentorship; 2) community-based education for out-of-school girls; 3) comprehensive sexuality education; and 4) livelihoods and employment skills programming.

To promote lasting change for adolescent girls and to position and support them to lead initiatives for their own development, UNICEF

should expand its work on strengthening the agency of adolescent girls in the region.

Enabling environments should be created for adolescent girls within their families and communities

UNICEF and partners have employed outreach and intergenerational dialogues, public events and workshops, positive parenting and media, role models and mentors for adolescent girls, capacity building and values clarification training with faith leaders, and local community accountabilities. The findings suggest that community mobilization strategies should go beyond raising awareness and actively encourage key influencers to support girls to access services and resources and pursue a wider range of opportunities.

It is essential to foster policy and structural change and to build systems and institutional partnerships in order to establish an enabling ecosystem for adolescent girls

Girls' ability to make their own, informed choices about their lives, health and future relies on accessible services and systems that support those choices. Given the scale of UNICEF programming and investment in frontline capacity, as well as its engagement and advocacy with national governments, many of the advances in the region have occurred in strengthening systems and services through frontline capacity building, cash transfers and transforming education systems.

Collaboration with government agencies, ministries and departments is an important aspect of UNICEF advocacy for policies that prioritize adolescent girls' needs and to support programmes and initiatives that have positive impacts on adolescent girls' lives.

Partnering with girl- and women-led organizations helps to support grassroots feminist movements. This is a crucial component but needs more investment for sustainable and gender-transformative programming. Such investments also help

bring to the fore the voices of adolescent girls, especially those from marginalized sections of society, and enable UNICEF and its partners to leverage the strong grassroot networks and connections of these organizations.

Multisectoral interventions have the potential to meet the needs of adolescent girls

Our findings demonstrate that the most effective programmes use multiple strategies to address adolescent girls' diverse needs, for instance, safe spaces and skills building complemented by community engagement and strengthened frontline capacity. Interventions should therefore be multi-sectoral and should include intentional shifts from skills and empowerment towards girls' agency and government and community accountability.

Promising intervention areas with high impact

The review identified three areas where targeted investments by UNICEF will greatly amplify impact on adolescent girls in the South Asia region.

● Supporting mental health: With growing attention to mental health among governments and partners, UNICEF has the opportunity to design gender-transformative and inclusive mental health initiatives, avoiding over-medicalization and focusing on the gendered social determinants of mental health inequities.

● Large-scale programmes to increase access to digital technology for girls including digital literacy: UNICEF has the opportunity to leverage large-scale investments to address gender gaps in digital skills and access to technology. This will support and scale up gender-transformative programming and address the gender norms that shape girls' access to and experience with online spaces.

● Partnerships with girl- and women-led networks: UNICEF can support girls'

leadership by shifting its approach to partnerships with women and girls' networks and organizations, with long-term partnership mechanisms that allow for better communication and accountability between UNICEF and girls' advocates.

❯ Our recommendations

The recommendations emerging from this analysis fall into two broad categories: where investments can be made in programming for the greatest gender-transformative impact on adolescent girls, and where investments can be made to address institutional gaps and challenges.

Programming investments with the greatest impact on adolescent girls

1. Implement gender-transformative approaches to move from reaching girls to promoting gender equality

● Design and implement more programmes specifically catering to the needs and aspirations of girls, including investments into formative research, human-centred design, and meaningful participation of girls in programme design delivery and evaluation, including consultations to inform programme design, periodic feedback mechanisms and grant-making/ selection of partner organizations.

● Build comprehensive programme portfolios working across multiple levels of the socio-ecological framework and with multiple elements of a gender-transformative approach, with increased investment in community-based approaches to activate social capital for girls, and in girls' advocates to influence gender norms and power with parents, social mobilizers and religious leaders.

● Engage men and boys not just as allies and protectors but as participants who also benefit from positive masculinities and gender equality. Invest in developing tools and methodologies to move

beyond engaging men at a superficial level.

- Work with parents and communities to challenge restrictive gender norms and create an enabling environment that supports girls to have more opportunities, including choosing their education and careers free from expectations and stigma.
- Leverage existing relationships with governments and strengthen their capacities to incorporate gender-transformative approaches, with a focus on adolescent girls and foster gender-responsive systems.

2. Identify and reach more marginalized girls including those who are out of school, married and/or living with disabilities

- Understand and map adolescent girls who are not reached by current programming, such as out-of-school girls, girls with disabilities, rural or geographically remote girls, those impacted by migration, language, racial, religious, and ethnic minority girls, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) adolescents, married adolescents and others, in collaboration with local organizations and community-based networks. Work within existing programming to ensure inclusion and accessibility for all girls while investing in partners and programming approaches to specifically reach marginalized girls.

- Leverage physical community spaces like adolescent-friendly safe spaces, alternative learning pathway centres and informal schooling centres to provide opportunities for out-of-school learning and continuing education for girls without access to formal education. Ensure that community education programmes include transferable skills as well as livelihood training with a gender-transformative perspective.

- Foster the direct inclusion of married adolescent girls in existing programmes. Discussions with non-governmental organization (NGO) partners suggest that while they are reaching married adolescent girls, this is limited to those who are continuing their education even after marriage. Hence, it is imperative to include married adolescent girls who are confined in their homes.

- Employ more strategies to reach rural and geographically remote communities, such as increased partnerships with existing grassroots and local networks; using traditional technologies such as radio and television; advocating for and expanding relationships with the private sector to expand digital, telecoms and internet networks to remote areas; and dedicated funding to translate UNICEF tools and materials into local and less-used languages.

- Strengthen systems to reach and meet the needs of marginalized girls, and advocate for increased government financing and allocated budgets for programmes focused on adolescent girls.

3. Invest in expanded digital platforms and offerings that are fully accessible to and responsive to girls' needs without replicating restrictive gender norms in the digital space.

- Digital literacy and skills programmes should be specifically targeted towards reducing gender gaps, go beyond basic computing skills for girls, include financial literacy and life skills, and promote positive and non-violent masculinities for boys.

Investments to address institutional gaps and challenges

4. Expand partnerships for adolescent girls

- Expand partnerships with grassroots, community-based organizations, girl-led networks, and youth organizations.

- Support, facilitate and fund youth- and girl-led and women's networks and organizations to define and implement long-, medium- and short-term agendas and programmes. Employ movement-building approaches to collective funding, pass-through funds directed towards smaller, girl-led projects and programmes, and investments in mentorship and institutional capacity building for such organizations.

- Advocate for and support the role, participation and leadership of girls, adolescents, youth, and women's advocates in policy dialogue at all decision-making levels and as partners in the design and implementation of initiatives in all action areas.

- Prioritize cross-sectoral collaboration within UNICEF programmes and with implementing and development partners for holistic programming for adolescent girls, and invest in restructuring and integrating existing programmes to cater to the most vulnerable adolescent girls. Also integrate gender and the unique needs of girls into all sectoral plans.

- Scale up and harness inter-agency partnerships with other UN agencies and international organizations to develop programmes related to adolescent girls and maximize impact and reach.

5. Invest in data and evidence for informed programming with and for adolescent girls

- Prioritize gender analysis and gender-transformative approaches in programming and funding decisions, including in the selection of implementing partners.

- Invest in collecting sex-disaggregated data and data on marginalized and excluded adolescent girls to ensure that programmes are reaching girls equitably and inclusively.

- Support capacity building of government partners and other stakeholders for capturing quality data.

On 4 September 2022, 12-year-old Jamna made tea after collecting water supplied by UNICEF at a UNICEF-supported relief camp at the Cattle Farm on Ratnor Road, Umerkot City and district, Sindh province, Pakistan.

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Reema (14) stands outside a UNICEF-supported Child Friendly Space in Pakistan.

Introduction

Adolescents in South Asia face numerous challenges to accessing health, education, water and sanitation, child protection and social protection services. Girls are further burdened by unremunerated care responsibilities within households. Adolescents in South Asia are also affected by pervasive gender-based violence, in particular child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and, in some settings, have experienced war and humanitarian emergencies. Despite strong commitments to adolescent girls' development, some governments in South Asia still need to implement legislative and policy reforms for girls to thrive. In some countries, adolescent girls are prohibited from gaining an education; in other countries, schools are sites of entrenched gender inequality, harassment and gender-based violence, while comprehensive sexuality education is subject to government regulation. Adolescent girls face numerous barriers in accessing health services, including policies that require male or parental consent: a direct violation of their rights to health and their evolving capacity.

358 million adolescents call South Asia home. Of these, more than **170 million (48%)** are adolescent girls.

The experiences of adolescent girls, and their access to resources and opportunities, are shaped by patriarchy and local religious contexts which shape societal norms and values. Gender roles and stereotypes are deeply ingrained, with many girls expected to conform to traditional gender roles, such as marriage, prioritizing children and unremunerated household chores. In South Asia, a significant proportion of the populations live in rural areas: according to 2019 data, over 60 per cent of South Asia youth are rural-dwellers.[1] For example, in Bhutan, out of almost 65,000 adolescent girls, more than 55 per cent live in rural areas.[2] Adolescent girls

Figure 1: Adolescent population in South Asia (2023)
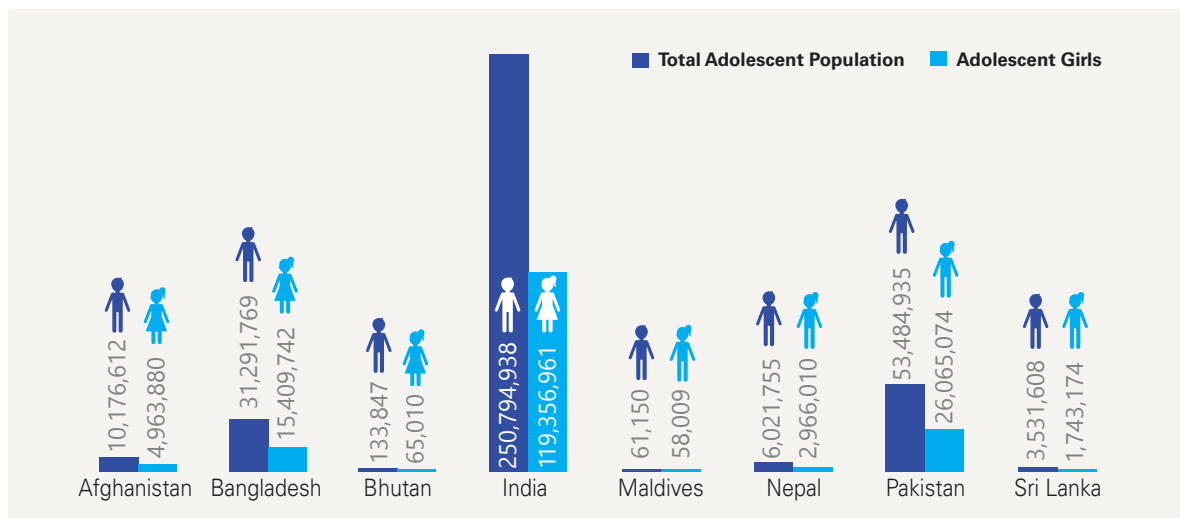
Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition and UNICEF Adolescent Girl Country Profile (2023). Maldives Bureau of Statistics. World Children´s Day 2023. Child Population Census.

in rural areas often have even less access to services and programmes than their urban peers, increasing their vulnerability to gender inequality. Across the board, gender inequality continues to limit girls' voices, agency, mobility, decision-making and bodily autonomy, as well as their access to information, education, health, skills and social protection services and entitlements.

❯ Study scope and objectives

UNICEF's Regional Office for South Asia commissioned this situation analysis to assess the current landscape of programming designed to address the specific needs of adolescent girls in the region through a gender-transformative lens. The analysis was designed to be broad in scope, though not a comprehensive or systematic assessment of all UNICEF-led or partner programmes in the region. This review was designed to explore the ability of or potential for programming to target and reduce gender inequalities that negatively impact and restrict girls in line with the UNICEF Global Adolescent Girl Strategy 2022–2025 and the regional framework. Rewriting the Narrative For the Second Decade With and For Girls in South Asia 2022–2025. The study focused on identifying key gaps, challenges and practices with promise to accelerate progress.

Study objectives

1 — Identify gaps in current programming and explore interventions to fully address the needs of adolescent girls in South Asia

2 — Foster organizational learning by gaining an understanding of what does and does not work to nurture girls' leadership and agency in the region

3 — Recommend strategies for interventions that address the needs and priorities of adolescent girls in the region

Methodology

This situation analysis was conducted by Collective Impact LLC between January and May of 2023. It covers all eight South Asia countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The analysis was conducted in accordance with recent UNICEF guidance on situation analyses[3] and included both in-person and virtual components. It utilized a mixed-methods design that included key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and participatory workshops to allow for cross-validation and triangulation across data sources. Both primary and secondary data were used to answer the research questions identified during the inception phase *(see Annex I)*.

The research team included both international and national consultants and incorporated a broad range of expertise. At least one member of the research team spent 3–5 days in each country (except Afghanistan) in collaboration with UNICEF country offices to collect primary data, facilitate workshops with UNICEF staff, and conduct KIIs and FGDs in person whenever possible and according to the preferences of key stakeholders. The research team did not carry out in-person data collection in Afghanistan due to the fragility of the context and political uncertainty. Instead, virtual KIIs and FGDs were conducted. Multiple group meetings were also held with gender focal points from Afghanistan to draw on their knowledge and experience.

To get a better sense of how adolescent girls fit into current UNICEF work in South Asia, the team conducted an initial literature review which included UNICEF Regional and Global Adolescent Girl Strategies, Gender Action Plan evaluations, Country Programme Documents and Country Strategies, Gender Programme Reviews and Situational Analyses, relevant Regional and Country Programme Reports on UNICEF regional priority areas, and country-specific programme/project reports and evaluations. These initial reviews highlighted gaps in the available data and informed the design of the data collection tools.

The situation analysis also incorporated data from multiple U-Report surveys conducted by UNICEF between 2020 and 2022 *(see Annex 2)*. U-Report is a messaging tool which empowers young people to share their perspectives and speak out on issues that matter to them. It gathers opinions and perspectives from adolescents and young people through platforms such as Facebook, Messenger, Viber and WhatsApp. U-Report surveys are also distributed through youth networks at the country level, and through Facebook and Instagram advertisements targeting adolescents and young people aged 13–24 years in all eight South Asia countries. Surveys and advertisement campaigns were made available in English and eight local languages: Bengali, Urdu, Nepali, Hindi, Pashto, Dari, Sinhala and Tamil.

Additional literature was shared by UNICEF and civil society organizations during and after the consultation process. This was reviewed by the study team and integrated into the analysis. As the analysis progressed, programme reports and evaluations from NGOs, peer-reviewed literature, programme documentation, including case studies and programmatic guidance, and a variety of government policies and data, were also reviewed.

❯ Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative research involved a series of consultations through KIIs, FGDs and participatory workshops. The research team used a targeted, purposive sampling approach. Gender focal points in the eight UNICEF country offices mapped in-country stakeholders, including UNICEF partners as well as youth-led and feminist organizations. Together with the gender focal points, the research team then compiled an initial list of potential key informants for each country, using the UNICEF mapping and their own networks within feminist organizations and women's movements. Key stakeholders were selected to participate in consultations in accordance with the following criteria:

● expertise in one or more areas relevant to the UNICEF Regional Strategy (health, education, child protection, social protection, WASH and mental health)

● experience in developing and/or implementing programmes for adolescents including girls and, ideally, expertise in promoting girls' agency, leadership and participation

● representation and diversity of knowledge, including marginalized groups, to ensure a broad range of perspectives and geographical locations

The sampling approach allowed engagement with diverse stakeholders including specialists across a broad range of sectors as well as members of youth networks above the age of 18, government officials and programme implementers from NGOs. Data was collected through a series of consultations that included KIIs, FGDs, and participatory workshops *(see Annex 3)*.

Key informant interviews were conducted in-person and virtually across all eight countries, with a total of 94 participants. Semi-structured interview guides provided a large spectrum of questions to draw from, based on the sector or area of expertise of the key informant *(see Annex 4)*.

Focus group discussions were conducted in-country with 10 groups, including young people aged 18–24 years, key stakeholders and implementing partners. Due to time constraints during the field visit to Maldives, it was not feasible to conduct an FGD. In Afghanistan, FGDs were conducted virtually.

A semi-structured FGD guide was used to frame the discussion while leaving space for relevant topics to emerge. This provided an opportunity to engage young people directly and for groups of particular interest, such as youth with disabilities, to offer their perspectives on the needs of adolescent girls *(See Annex 5)*.

Participatory workshops with UNICEF country office staff: With the exception of Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, in-person three-hour workshops were conducted in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan and no in-person data collection activities were conducted in Afghanistan. Most workshop participants were UNICEF staff, though a few implementing partners also participated in the India workshop. Participatory learning and action methods were used to assess and agree on shared priorities and potential barriers to progress, and to identify areas where greater collaboration could catalyse progress for adolescent girls. The gender equity continuum was used as a framework to assess current programming for adolescent girls *(See Annex 6)*.

All KIIs, FGDs and participatory workshops were documented through recordings, or by taking detailed notes if the interviewee did not wish to be recorded. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and the intended use of information, including their right to decline to answer questions or to be recorded, before consent was obtained. After data collection was completed, data from multiple sources were analysed using an inductive process in which codes and sub-codes were clustered by themes.

To ensure a collective and participatory knowledge production process, the data were validated through a **virtual sense-making workshop,** with UNICEF regional and country office staff, including gender focal points, gender advisors and other technical experts as well as UNICEF

Innocenti team members. This workshop offered participatory processes to help understand, validate, hone, nuance and/or contradict the preliminary findings. The research team used feedback and insights from this session to further refine the findings of the report.

❯ Defining success

There are many ways of defining what qualifies as a successful programme for adolescent girls. Many large-scale programmes in the region have successfully reached large numbers of adolescent girls through population-wide nutrition, enrolment, social protection and other schemes. Other programmes define their success through their ability to reach girls with information, skills and resources that allow for incremental but meaningful shifts in attitudes and behaviours that lead to more empowered decisions about sexual and reproductive health, age at marriage and other markers of girls' control over their bodies and futures. Still more reach the most marginalized, hard-to-reach or underserved populations, investing significant resources into developing accessible programmes for girls with disabilities, in remote communities, from linguistic, ethnic or religious minorities, or those marginalized through social stigma, discrimination and violence based on gender, sexuality, marital or other status. Finally, UNICEF and other partners invest significantly in programmes that reach and maintain girls' rights and well-being during humanitarian and other crises, hence defining success by their ability to keep girls connected to programmes and services that sustain support and protect them. All these forms of success are important when it comes to improving girls' lives: changes in social norms, stigma and discrimination are vital for access to resources, while better access creates a foundation on which g irls' leadership and participation are built.

Each of these definitions of successful programmes and investments deserves consideration in strategic determinations of 'what works' for adolescent girls. For each type of programme, the definition and markers of 'success' vary, with some focused on quantifying their progress through number of girls reached, and others using more subjective markers. In this review, programmes and initiatives are analysed by

1. **their ability to impact girls' lives through gender-transformative approaches that shift gender norms**
2. **build girls' agency and**
3. **create an enabling environment for girls to thrive.**

As stated in the Global Gender Action Plan for 2021–2025, UNICEF has committed to:

> seek to redress the underlying structural barriers to inequality faced by adolescent girls through addressing power dynamics and gender roles, norms, and relations at all levels. Sustainable changes in gender norms, systems and structures are only possible when the next generation is supported and empowered to participate in and lead progress towards equality in their families, communities, nations and the world.[4]

For social change and sustainable improvements in gender equality, adolescent girls' leadership, voice, agency and realization of their full potential must be at the forefront of UNICEF programming and advocacy. For girls to fully exercise their agency, they must be supported in realizing their rights and empowered through access to resources, inclusive and rights-based services, information and social and child protection schemes that prioritize their needs and consider their perspectives. In many cases, what works for adolescent girls is determined by the programme's success in providing services, information or resources. An agency-based approach recognizes this as necessary but not sufficient for transformative and lasting change.

❯ Limitations

While the research team worked to ensure a broad understanding of the context for adolescent girls, and to specifically target under-served, excluded and marginalized girls, this report should not be considered a comprehensive review. Resource constraints did not allow for the research team to visit partners and stakeholders in multiple regions in each country, or to meet with all actors working with and for adolescent girls in any country. In many South Asia countries, gender analysis and strategic planning work were going on at the same time as the research for this situation analysis, and the study team tried to align with those processes to avoid duplication of efforts. Focus groups and U-Report surveys, while covering large number of adolescents, should not be considered representative of the voices of all adolescents in any given country.

This is a qualitative review. While quantitative data are included where relevant and available, these were not collected for this review, nor were quantitative data on adolescent girls comprehensively analysed. Instead, this review highlights the voices and perspectives of country staff, civil society partners and youth advocates, including their assessments of what works and where UNICEF needs to improve its efforts.

Finally, the current political context and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is challenging and is changing rapidly. The UNICEF country office is in constant communication with partners and stakeholders to understand and adapt to the changing landscape for programming. The research team therefore did not engage with in-country partners separately out of respect for their time and priorities. While this review acknowledges and highlights the impact of the ongoing crisis on girls, the organisation remains agile to respond to and adapt programming that addresses the rapidly changing countext in the country to deliver results for girls.

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10th grader adolescent girl students at the Dantivada model school at the STEM lab, India.

Situation of adolescent girls in South Asia

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges already faced by adolescent girls in South Asia. It resulted in school closures across the region, and many adolescent girls who could no longer access the education and social support provided by schools were at increased risk of sexual and intra-household violence, unintended pregnancy and CEFM, alongside increased care burdens and food insecurity.[5] Globally, lockdowns during COVID-19 made access to protection services focusing on gender-based violence less accessible. According to the International Labour Organization,[6] as many as 46.5 per cent of female adolescents are not participating in education, employment or training *(see Figure 3)*.

In South Asia, there are wide disparities between and within countries regarding the situation of adolescent girls. Their situation is particularly dire in Afghanistan, which faces multiple and protracted climate and humanitarian crises. Job losses, poverty and food insecurity have all rapidly increased since the takeover by the Taliban in 2021, which in turn came after decades of conflict, cyclical drought and flooding and the lingering impacts of COVID-19. Following the regime change, international aid was suspended, bringing the country to the verge of economic collapse.[7] Women and girls, particularly in female-headed households, are disproportionately affected by these multiple crises and their vulnerability to shocks is aggravated by increased restrictions and discrimination.[8]

This chapter presents contextual information about the situation of adolescent girls across the region, organized by the key areas outlined in UNICEF's Gender Action Plan:[9] Health, education, GBV and child marriage, WASH and social protection and care work. In each section, general issues related to South Asia are highlighted, followed by country-specific examples. Many of the issues raised in the Gender Action Plan are interrelated: for example, in Nepal, undernutrition, early marriage and childbearing, incomplete schooling, unequal work opportunities and limited decision-making power within and outside households are all significant and compounding challenges for adolescent girls and inequalities between boys and girls affect the aspirations of adolescents for their futures.[10]

Girls wade through floodwaters on the way to school in Sunamganj, Bangladesh.

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🩺 Health

Adolescent pregnancy has higher risks of maternal as well as infant mortality and morbidity,[11] and can prevent girls from completing their education and advancing economically.[12] This remains a major constraint for girls in South Asia, where the rate of adolescent pregnancy is among the highest in the world.[13] Between 1995 and 2020, only 43 per cent of adolescent girls aged 15–19 years in South Asia had their needs for contraception satisfied using modern methods.[14]

The prevalence of adolescent pregnancy is 35 per cent in Bangladesh, and 21 per cent in Nepal and India.[15] Adolescent fertility rates are high across South Asia, with 62 and 76 girls per 1,000 girls below the age of 19 giving birth in Afghanistan and Bangladesh respectively.[16]

About 29 per cent of girls in Pakistan get married by the age of 18.[17] Approximately 20 per cent of married adolescent girls and women aged 15–19 years start childbearing without access to programmes that could provide them with information and support to make informed and voluntary decisions about their reproductive health and rights.[18]

In Nepal, unequal access to health care and skewed intra-household food allocations lead to food and micronutrient deprivations, which primarily impact on adolescent girls. Poor nutrition during adolescence leads to intergenerational deprivation and ill-health once these girls have children, and increases risks of maternal and infant mortality and morbidity.[19] In India, the majority of young women who married in childhood gave birth as adolescents.[20] A recent national review in India found that adolescents were widely affected by under- and overnutrition, mental disorders, substance use and violence.[21]

In Afghanistan, women and girls face drastic restrictions in their access to health care, including new policies mandating that male family members must accompany women to medical appointments, and prohibiting male health-care professionals from treating girls
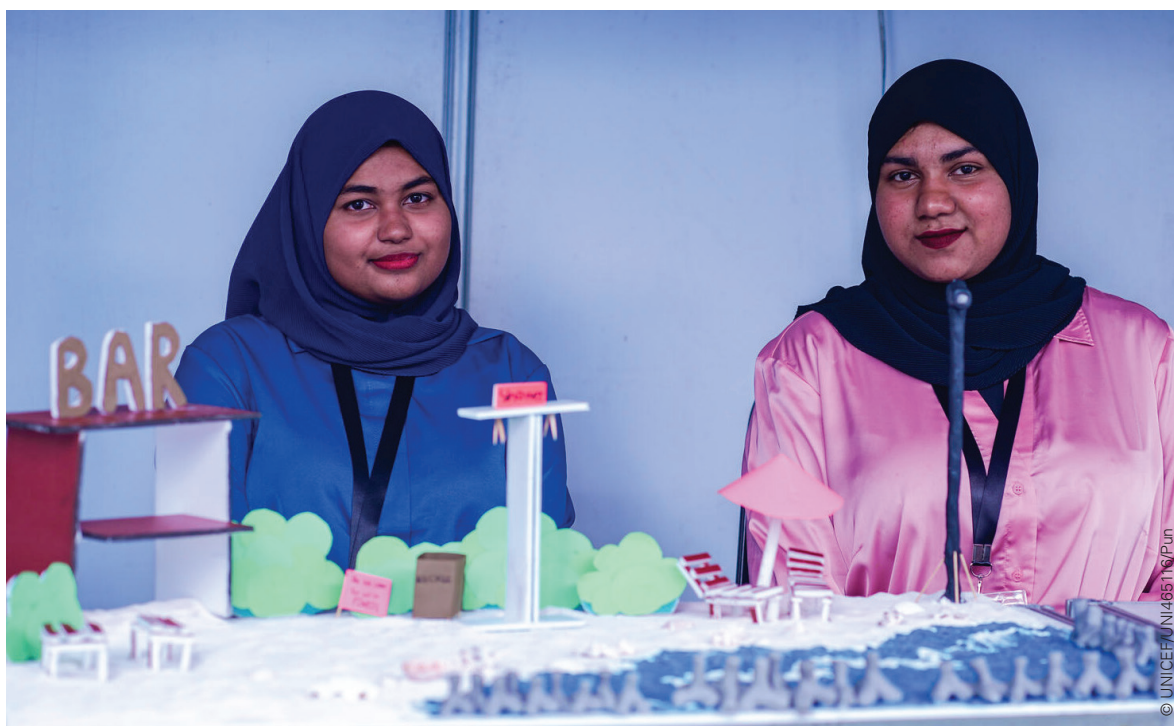
Shaffaf, 17 (left) and Shaf'aa, 16 (right) made plans to restore one of the beaches in Laamu Fonadhoo, Maldives, and exhibited their idea at the 3rd National Conference of Young People on Climate Action. "As the climate is changing day by day, we are losing sand
from the beach. I am concerned that we won't be able to keep our beach for tomorrow and for the next generation" say Shaf'aa.

Figure 2: Teenage pregnancy in South Asia (birth per 1,000 women aged 15-19)
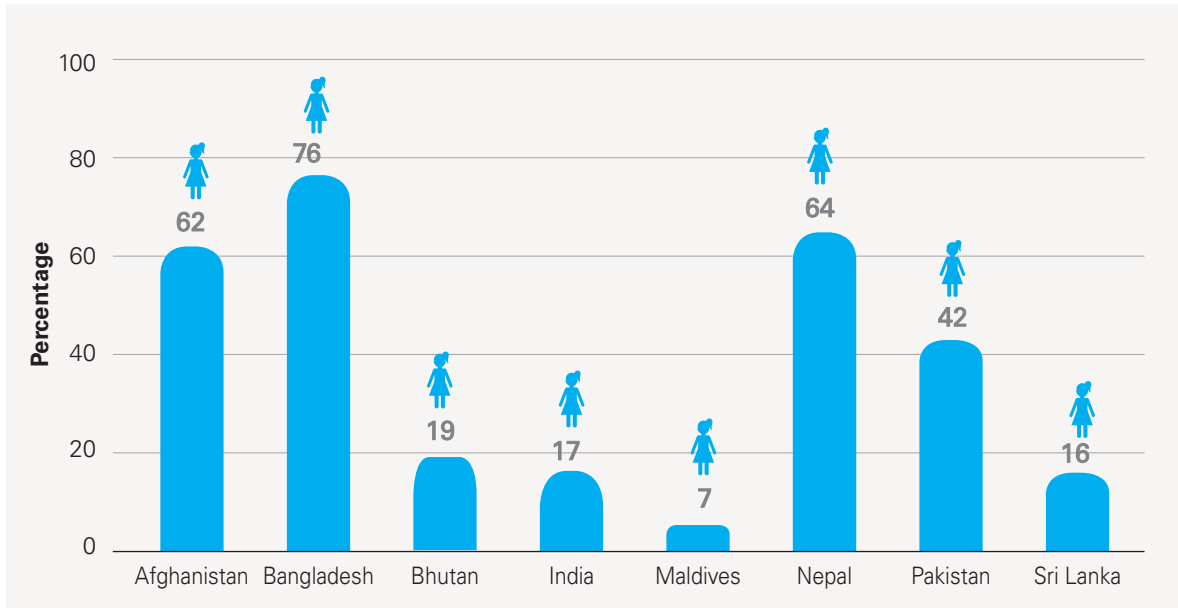
Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022. Online Edition. Afghanistan MICS, 2023.

and women. Access to sexual and reproductive healthcare has declined, with disastrous consequences for maternal and new-born health. Prohibitions on women and girls' education have negatively affected the growth of the healthcare workforce. Even before the Taliban takeover, health indicators in Afghanistan were deteriorating.[22]

Figure 3: Anaemia in adolescent girls aged 10-19 years
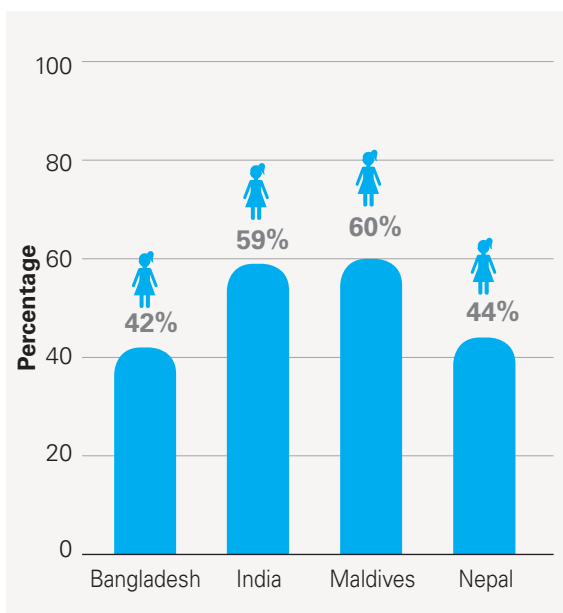
Source: DHS Stat Compiler

Mental health issues are a critical concern across South Asia countries. In Sri Lanka, the 2016 Global School-Based Health Survey found that 6.6 per cent of in-school adolescents aged 13–17 years attempted suicide, while 9.3 per cent reported suicidal ideation. The percentage of students aged 13–17 years who reported that they seriously considered attempting suicide in the last 12 months varied from 4.9 per cent in Bangladesh to 13.7 per cent in Nepal, while the mortality rate due to self-harm for adolescents (aged 15–19 years) was highest in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The percentage of both boys and girls who reported feeling lonely most of the time or always in the 12 months preceding the study varied from 6.7 per cent in Nepal to 15.5 per cent in Maldives.[23]

The mental health of adolescents emerged as a global priority before and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gender norms play an important role in shaping mental health outcomes for adolescents of all genders: for boys they might impair the ability to regulate and express their emo tions, while girls face more restrictions on social interactions and movement as well as control over their bodies and sexuality.[24] Girls living with disabilities are particularly disadvantaged. Suicide is the

second leading cause of death for adolescents in South Asia.[25] In Nepal, 529 suicide cases committed by girls were reported to the police in 2022-23 as opposed to 266 by boys, pointing to the need for gender-responsive mental health and psychosocial well-being programming. Mental health was identified as a priority by UNICEF staff, governments, adolescents and civil society partners in all eight countries, while only four countries reported existing mental health initiatives targeting adolescent girls (Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan).

📖 Education

In 2016, 46 million girls were out of school in South Asia. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, some communities experienced major disparities in enrolment and literacy rates due to fragility, lack of access to secondary education and restrictive social and cultural norms.[26] South Asia is home to the world's largest population of out-of-school children and youth, numbering 31.8 million in total, including 8.2 million at primary level (6–9 years) and 23.6 million at secondary level (10–14 years).[27] Data from 2018 suggest that only 38 per cent of girls complete upper-secondary school.[28] While millions of children who completed primary education have not mastered foundational literacy and numeracy, 2018 data also suggest that 11 in 13 female youth in South Asia are literate.[29] Adolescents who are disabled, have different sexual or gender identities, or belong to ethnic and linguistic minorities or lower castes face particular challenges in educational settings.

The two largest countries in the region (India and Pakistan) accounted for nearly 80 per cent of out-of-school children before the pandemic.[30] In Afghanistan, the situation for adolescent girls is dire. About 90.3 per cent of girls from the poorest wealth quintile, and 76.9 per cent from the richest wealth quintile, are out of school at the lower-secondary level.[31] With the regime change in 2021, Afghanistan became the only country in the world where girls are banned from going to secondary school or accessing tertiary education.[32]

There is also a correlation between CEFM and the ability of adolescent girls to access schooling.[33] Married girls in Nepal are 14 times more likely to be out of school,[34] with reduced future earnings.

Figure 4: Percentage of adolescents who are out of school at lower-secondary level
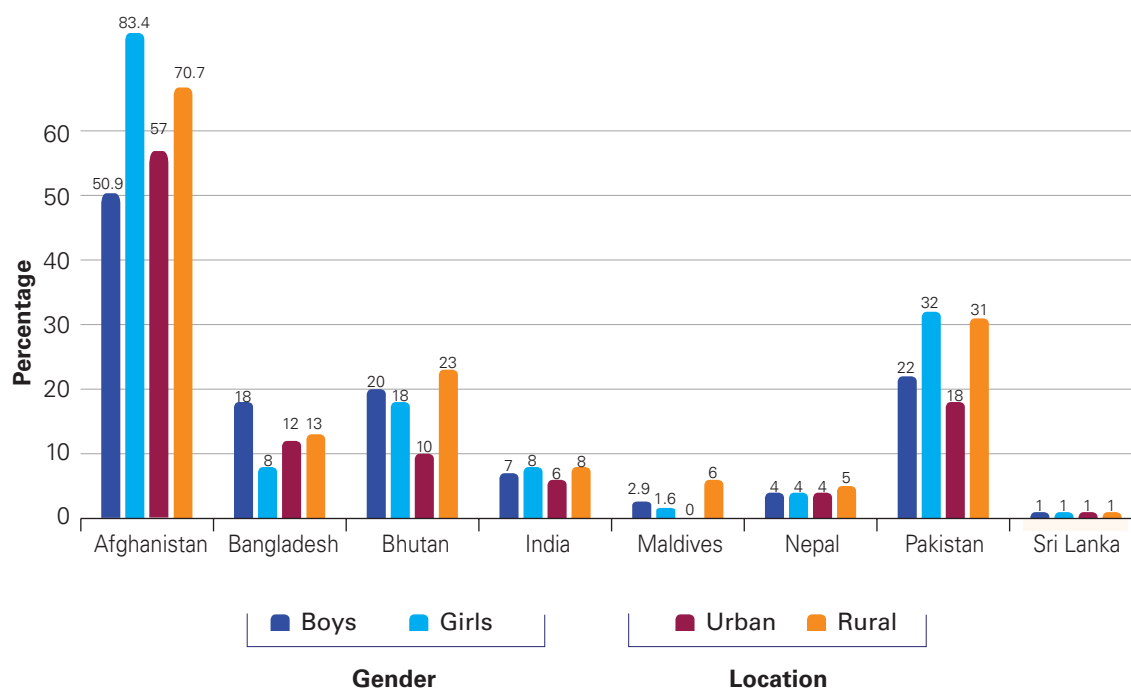
Sources: Afghanistan MICS, 2023., Bangladesh MICS, 2019., Bhutan MICS, 2010., India HDS, 2015-2016., Maldives Education Sector Analysis, 2019., Nepal MICS, 2019., Pakistan DHS, 2017-2018., Sri Lanka DHS, 2016.

During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, digital technology was an important means of maintaining access to education, but adolescent girls in South Asia were hampered by the immense barriers they face due to the digital divide. Inequalities in the physical or offline world also manifest in the virtual world, leading to a digital gender divide.[35] Unequal access to connectivity and device ownership, harmful gender norms and online safety concerns all contribute to this gender digital divide. In South Asia, the gap between women's and girls' access to, and use of, digital platforms compared to their male counterparts has only widened, from 36 per cent in 2020 to 41 per cent in 2022.[36] Women are 41 per cent less likely than men to use mobile internet. Adolescent girls are less likely to have internet access and to develop the digital skills that are increasingly indispensable in everyday life.[37] There are widespread social norms in South Asia that it is inappropriate for women to interact with men outside their close family and for their movement outside the home to be restricted. These also impact on mobile ownership and use, as girls and women are unable to visit retailers to top up, have less exposure to marketing and fewer people to ask for advice.[38]

The digital divide for adolescent girls, which denied them access to online education, is stark in numerous countries. In India the mobile ownership gender gap is estimated to

An adolescent girl student at a UNICEF-supported Community Based Education (CBE) centre in Shahristan District, Daikundi Province in central Afghanistan.

be 11 per cent, in Bangladesh 20 per cent, and in Pakistan 35 per cent. Access to the internet using mobile devices is even higher in the three countries: in Pakistan 38 per cent, in India 40 per cent and in Bangladesh 43 per cent.[39] During the COVID-19 school closures, 50.9 per cent of girls in Bangladesh lacked access to mobile devices and only 28.6 per cent could use mobile devices for online learning.

Figure 5: Percentage of adolescents aged 15–19 years who are not in education, employment or training
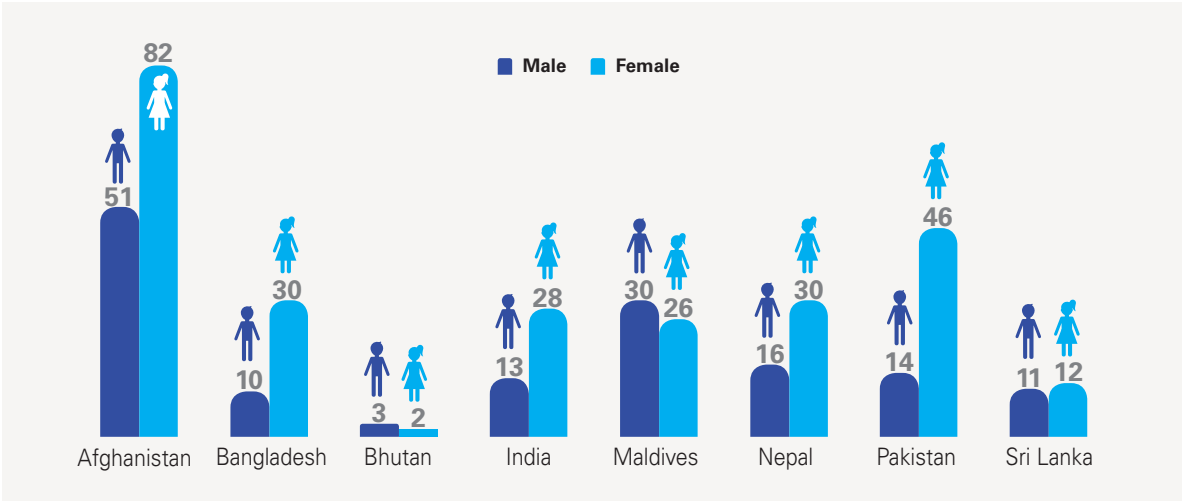
Source: UNICEF Adolescent Data Portal – data ranging from 2016 to 2021.

Gender-based violence and child marriage

Gender-based violence (GBV) is normative in South Asia, serving to reinforce norms for girls. In 2018, more than 42 per cent of adolescent girls, and 28 per cent of boys, believed that a husband is justified in beating his wife under certain circumstances.[40]

CEFM is prevalent in the region. In 2019, 30 per cent of women aged 20–24 years were first married or in union by age 18.[41] South Asia is home to 290 million married adolescent girls, the largest number in the world and comprising 45 per cent of the global total.[42]

Girls living in rural areas, those living in urban poverty, and those from single-parent households, are more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and violence. These girls face significant barriers to education, economic opportunities and health care, which limit their ability to fully participate in society and
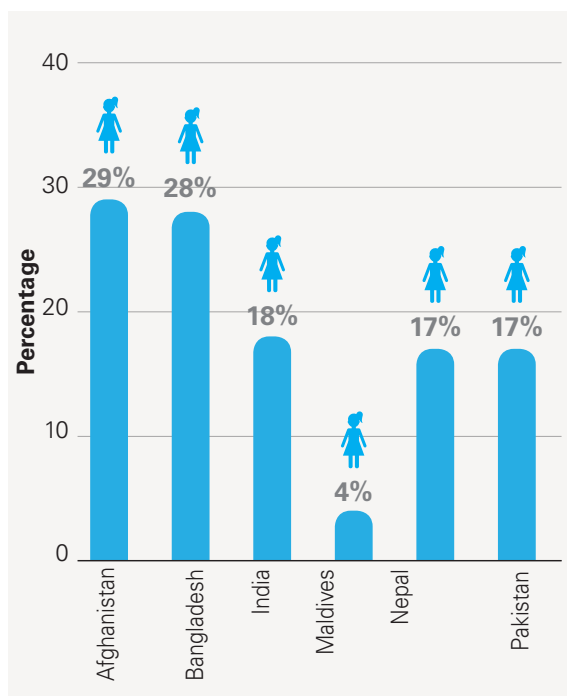
reach their potential. Empowering them with technology can help to overcome these barriers and promote their empowerment and well-being.

In Nepal, only 4 per cent of girls aged 15–19 years, and 3 per cent of girls in this age group who had ever experienced forced sex (i.e. rape) sought professional help in 2018; indeed, this is believed to be an overestimate. Moreover, 63.8 per cent of survivors of sexual violence were girls under the age of 18, with 82.2 per cent of perpetrators being acquaintances.[43] Between 2010 and 2018, 28 per cent of ever-partnered girls in Afghanistan and Bangladesh experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a current or former intimate partner during the preceding 12 months.[44] In Pakistan, the damage caused by the 2022 floods, coupled with ongoing political instability, economic crises and food insecurity, has heightened the vulnerability of adolescent girls to violence, including sexual exploitation and CEFM. Married adolescent girls in India are more likely to report that wife-beating is justified and to experience such violence themselves.[45]

In Sri Lanka, the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse among adolescent girls and young women aged 15–24 years was reported to be 2.6 per cent in 2016, while close to 4 per cent reported sexual violence by a non-partner since the age of 15. Harassment of women in public spaces was high: 90 per cent of women reported in the same year having experienced sexual harassment on buses and trains at least once.[46] There is anecdotal evidence that the combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis has exacerbated the situation for adolescent girls in the country.

In India, nearly one in four young women are married or in union before their 18th birthday. Girls who are the most marginalized, from the poorest households, with the least education, and residing in rural areas, are most likely to be subjected to CEFM.[47] India has halved child marriage prevalence over a last decade and a half (from 47 per cent in 2005 to 23 per cent in 2020). Although progress decelerated during and because of the COVID-19 pandemic, India has sustained a positive decline rate above most

Figure 6: Percentage of ever-married girls aged 15–19 years who experienced physical and/or sexual violence committed by a husband or partner in the past 12 months (SDG 5.2.1)

Source: Intimate partner violence – UNICEF Global Databases

Asian countries. Yet, though global progress in eliminating CEFM has largely been driven by declines in India, the country is still home to the world's largest number of married adolescent girls.

According to Girls not Brides, in Afghanistan, 28 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18 and 4 per cent before 15. In Nepal, the prevalence of child marriage among women aged 20–24 is 32.8 per cent.[48] Girls in Nepal have fewer remunerated labour market opportunities, which, combined with household poverty and societal pressures, are forcing them to marry early rather than continue their studies.[49] In Bangladesh, 11.2 per cent and 40.7 per cent of women aged 20–24 years are married before the ages of 15 and 18 respectively.[50]

Children participate in an activity of Child Line helpline 1098, an emergency helpline number for children at Child Safe Space inside the panchayat building at Sargipa village, Kondagaon, Bastar district in Chhattisgarh, India. The first phase of the Safe Spaces program was launched in September last year with 30 model Safe Spaces in 30 villages of Bastar district.

Water, sanitation and hygiene

In South Asia, 610 million people practice open defecation (over 60 per cent of the global burden) and over 119 million people lack access to even basic levels of drinking water.[51] Globally, menstrual hygiene management is an important gender issue that affects one-quarter of the world population: the 1.8 billion women and girls of reproductive age. Yet menstruation continues to be a taboo in most countries in South Asia with widespread social norms and practices that do not allow women and girls to use sanitation facilities while they are menstruating.[52] Globally, girls are tasked with carrying water, yet they are often the last to take advantage of using the water they carry.

A school nurse provides consultation to adolescent girls on menstrual hygiene and adolescent health in Nepal.

Social protection and care work

While household chores for girls and boys are not harmful, spending excessive time on them can curtail opportunities to focus on school. Girls carry a much larger burden of household care work than boys. Globally, the chores girls perform in the household, such as cooking, cleaning and caring for younger siblings can restrict women to sex-stereotyped activities later in life, depriving them of decent work opportunities.[53]

In Afghanistan, over 20 per cent of girls aged 10–14 years were more likely than boys of the same age to spend 21 hours or more on household chores in 2018; in Nepal, the same figure is 15 per cent.[54] In Indian households adolescent girls work 120–150 per cent more hours than boys, making it harder to balance schoolwork with household responsibilities.[55] In Bangladesh, women are expected to shoulder the vast majority of domestic and care work:

a recent time use survey conducted by the government found that women spend 4.6 hours on unpaid domestic work for every 0.6 hours spent by men, and 1.2 hours on unpaid care work compared to 0.2 hours by men.[56]

In Bangladesh, UNICEF supported the strengthening of social protection coverage and increased access to basic social services for children and women in 25 tea gardens through an analysis to understand the targeting barriers of the social transfer schemes and to assess the poverty impact of a universal cash transfer programme for children. Policy dialogues were organized with the government, tea garden owners, UN and civil society with communication messages in special newspaper supplements and social media posts. Notwithstanding progress, enhanced and sustained operations and innovative approaches are required to reach vulnerable groups of women and girls in challenging operating environments as various humanitarian crises in the region are unfolding.

Neha Modhcompleted the UNICEF life skills programme online and has since helped 120 other students in her district in Gujarat, India, to complete the programme.

Findings

With its broad mandate and wide range of investments, UNICEF has had a significant impact on adolescent girls in South Asia, even through programming that is gender-neutral or generalized. At the same time, UNICEF offices in the region reported significant gaps in programming that is specifically targeted at adolescent girls as part of dedicated gender programmes and strategies.

This review analyses programmes that were geared towards adolescents in general (e.g. education programmes for both girls and boys) and those intentionally targeting adolescent girls (e.g. safe spaces specifically for girls) to identify which strategies are most widely used and are most effective.

By examining the core elements of gender-transformative approaches, this analysis identifies promising approaches, gaps and challenges and commonly used and effective strategies. It also highlights investments and strategies that could be scaled up or used more effectively to promote gender-transformative approaches and strengthen girls' agency.

This review is meant to be situated alongside country and regional strategies[57] and to offer guidance for strengthening programmes to better meet the needs of adolescent girls. The areas it highlights are not meant to replace existing work, but to supplement and strengthen it. Areas where UNICEF is already making progress – such as reducing gender gaps in school enrolment and ensuring education and service continuity during crises – remain vital investments for adolescent girls, but are not included in this analysis.

Finding 1

Use of gender-transformative approaches

The analysis is based on the six core elements of the gender-transformative approach that should be integrated into programming:

Figure 7: Effective strategies to reach adolescent girls
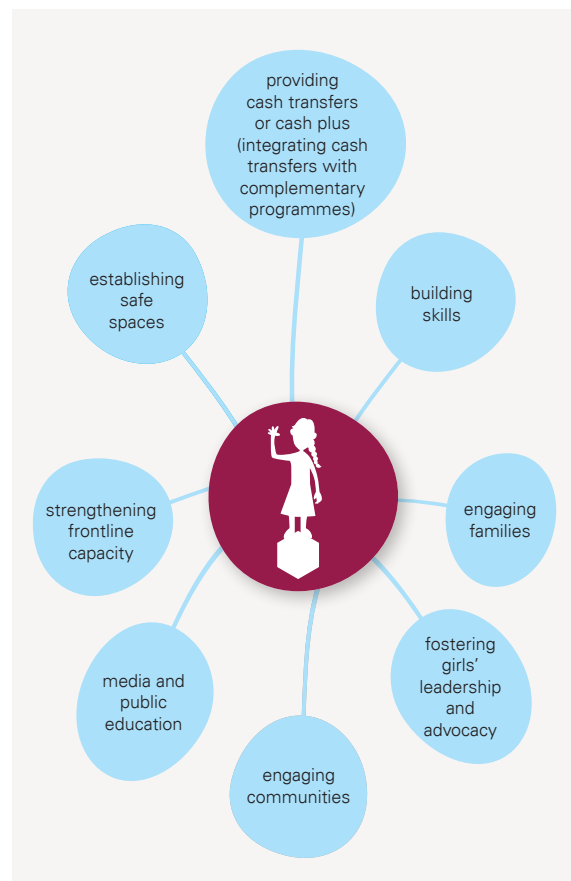
The analysis suggests that UNICEF and partner programmes tend to be concentrated in a few areas, and many struggle to make the shift from skills and empowerment to agency.

Changing norms: Programmes in the region use a combination of strategies for norms change, including safe spaces, media and advocacy, intergenerational and community dialogues, peer education, mentorship, parenting programmes and digital campaigns, among others, to target restrictive social and gender norms. Successful norms change programmes aim to: 1) create alternative or new, less restrictive norms; 2) support girls and community members to challenge existing norms; 3) promote public discussions or discourses about norms and their impacts; or 4) eliminate norm-based restrictions and discrimination in policies, laws and institutions.

Ugyen from Bhutan talks about the importance of and challenges girls in remote mountain communities encounter in acquiring digital literacy during the Regional Moment of Reflection held on the eve of the International Day of the Girl Child in Kathmandu in October 2023.

Dongoria tribal girls enjoy their monthly session with an Anganwadi worker or a PREM (People's Rural Education Movement) coordinator in Khajuri village, India. The adolescents address their mental and physical issues, exercise, play games, dance and take an oath to never marry under age. Khajuri is a model 'Child Marriage Free' village in Kurli Gram Panchayat (GP), Bissamcuttack block, Rayagada district, Odisha.

Supporting adolescent girls' agency, skills and empowerment: Most UNICEF and partner programming in the South Asia region has, as a specific objective, the empowerment of girls, adolescents or young people. Still more work with girls and boys to empower them by enhancing their digital and other skills, while a few explicitly target girls' agency. Among the wide range of programmes in this area, four specific approaches stand out: 1) using safe spaces for girls to deliver peer support, skills development and mentorship; 2) UNICEF's work in providing community-based education for out-of-school girls; 3) promoting the implementation and improvement of comprehensive sexuality

education; and 4) livelihoods and employment skills programming for adolescents.

Addressing masculinities and engaging men and boys: There is an increasing recognition of the importance of working with men and boys to address harmful masculinities and their negative consequences on their lives and on the communities of which they are an integral part of. Engaging men and boys is crucial for advancing gender equality by adapting gender-transformative approaches that promotes both the empowerment of girls and positive masculinities both in support of girls and in their own right. Positive masculinity programming creates safe spaces for men and boys to reflect on what it means to be a 'man' and encourages them to redefine masculinities to be more emotionally expressive, inclusive, empathetic, and compassionate.

Soniya serves as a barefoot community counsellor in Rahul Nagar, Bhopal. She works with young girls and boys in the community providing mental health and psychosocial support services through counselling sessions.

Engaging families and communities:
Creating an enabling environment for adolescent girls within their communities is a key strategy to support them to develop and exercise their agency. UNICEF and partners have employed outreach and intergenerational dialogues, public events and workshops, positive parenting and media, role models and mentors for adolescent girls, capacity building and values clarification training with faith leaders, and local policy advocacy. To be gender transformative, community mobilization strategies should go beyond raising awareness and actively encourage key influencers to support girls to access services and resources and pursue a wider range of opportunities.

A female teacher read stories to the children of Rajeev Nagar Basti in Bhopal. School dropouts were common in the community, but gradually she was able to register dropped-out children back into the school by persuading parents to send them to the library and essential educational courses.

Building systems and services: The ability of girls to make their own, informed choices about their lives, health and future relies on accessible services and systems that support those choices. Given the scale of UNICEF

13-year-old Fatima plays with building blocks inside the child-friendly space established by UNICEF in a camp for flood-affected people near Moenjodaro, Sindh, Pakistan.

programming and investment in frontline capacity strengthening and expansion, as well as its engagement and advocacy with national governments, many of the advances in the region have occurred in strengthening systems and services through frontline capacity building, cash transfers and transforming education systems.

Fostering policy and structural change, and building institutional partnerships:
Collaboration with government agencies, ministries and departments is an important aspect of UNICEF advocacy for policies that prioritize adolescent girls' needs and to support programmes and initiatives that have positive impacts on adolescent girls' lives. Partnering with girl and women-led organizations helps to support grassroots feminist movements. This is crucial component but needs more investment to enable sustainable and gender-transformative programming.

It is important to note, however, that the use of these strategies on their own is not evidence of gender-transformative programming. Gender-transformative impact is maximized when programmes combine multiple strategies across elements and sectors to target the underlying norms, drivers and power dynamics that create and sustain gender inequalities. Many current programmes and interventions struggle to adopt a targeted, gender-transformative approach for girls.

17-year-old Kubra reads aloud a poem at the temporary learning centre established by UNICEF in a camp for flood-affected people near Moenjodaro, Sindh, Pakistan. Kubra is the only high school graduate in the centre. "I cried myself to sleep the first few nights at this camp. Our life was uprooted overnight. I couldn't accept it. This centre helped me adjust to my new life. When I started attending this centre, I came across so many other girls who were just as depressed and lonely. This centre allowed us to bond and share each other's grief," says Kubra.

Figure 8: The gender equity continuum
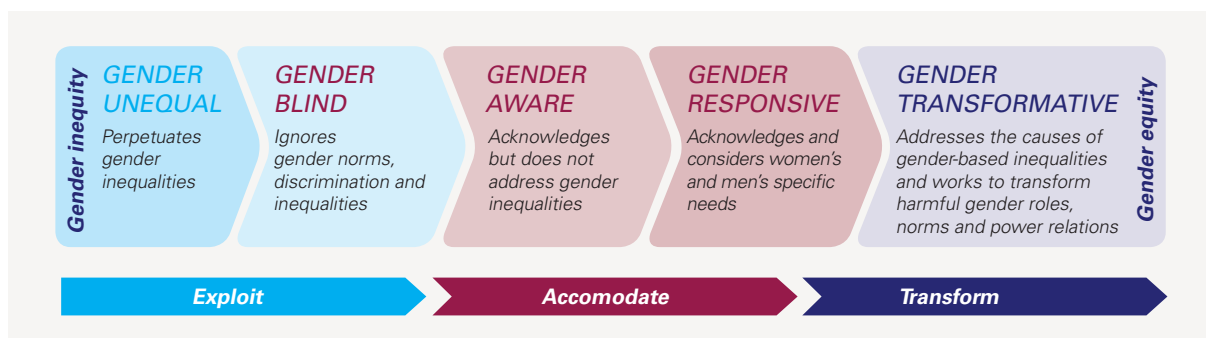
Source: Adapted from UNDP's Gender Results Effectiveness Scale.

While many strategies can be used to advance gender equality, the key to gender-transformative programmes lies in the combination of strategies acting at multiple levels and addressing multiple concerns, and in the specific focus on shifting power and agency to adolescent girls, both in their individual lives and in their ability to shape the world around them.

As part of this review, a selection of effective strategies used by programmes across the South Asia region were analysed and mapped onto the first five elements of the gender-transformative approach *(see Annex 4)*; the sixth, institutional partnerships, is separately analysed.

This review is based not on a comprehensive overview of all programming in the region, but specifically on programmes with recent evaluations that were identified by UNICEF country staff and partners as being particularly impactful or holding promise for adolescent girls.

In this analysis, clear patterns emerged in the activities and strategies used by effective programmes to reach girls and their communities.

Participants in country office workshops conducted for this analysis considered where their programming with and for adolescent girls ranks along the gender equity continuum, ranging from gender-unequal to gender-transformative *(see Figure 8)*. Gender-transformative programmes need to explicitly address deeply rooted social and gender norms, power structures, and inequalities in access to resources, that impinge on adolescent girls' agency.

The review and primary data collected for this analysis suggest that there are two layers of constraints impacting on UNICEF programmes' ability to apply a gender-transformative lens.

First, while there is a clear conceptual commitment to gender-transformative approaches amongst country office staff and many of their partners, aligning these approaches with the design, content and implementation continues to be a challenge. In particular, the difference between 'reaching girls' and 'promoting gender equality' needs to be better defined and understood. Addressing and changing social norms is widely perceived to be an optional add-on, rather than a core element of gender programming. The primary data reveals a need for regular and deeper dialogue, reflection and training on how to design and implement gender-transformative approaches.

Weak public sector capacity for gender equality also undermines UNICEF's ability to support a gender-transformative approach in state-initiated adolescent programmes. Public-sector institutions have limited capacity to apply gender-based analysis that considers intersecting identity factors and brings gender equality goals and the perspectives of women and girls to the fore in policymaking, resource allocation and programme delivery. To address this, UNICEF can leverage its relationship with national governments and ministries to build capacity around gender among key ministry staff and policymakers. Thus UNICEF country offices should position themselves to hold governments accountable for their commitments to protect the rights of women and girls and to push states to adopt a gender-transformative lens.

Two-thirds reduction in child marriage through gender-transformative programming, Bangladesh and Nepal

The **Tipping Point Initiative** was a six-year multi-level programme implemented by CARE International in Bangladesh and Nepal that demonstrated the impact of a gender-transformative approach to addressing CEFM. At the end of the programme, a cluster randomized controlled trial found it had achieved a 67 per cent reduction in child marriage.

All intervention arms included a core set of interventions seeking to change girls', boys' and parents' behaviours and attitudes related to child marriage. The Plus component also included activities to change social norms and support an enabling environment for community-level change.

Strategies used by Tipping Point Programme Plus to address social norms included:

● **Amader Kotha (Our Voice):**[58] After seeing a professional production of forum theatre, interactive street theatre which enacts everyday situations to provoke discussion and promote social change, some adolescent participants created a community talk show to recognize and celebrate role models from their communities who are early adopters of equal gender norms, followed by a facilitated dialogue. In this rural community,

Amader Kotha's success in breaking taboos and sparking conversations works through discussing sensitive subjects easily, igniting imaginations and promoting dialogue in the community. While the talk show plays a vital role, it's part of a broader initiative influencing perceptions and choices for girls.

where girls' mobility is extremely limited, the street theatre helped to demonstrate an alternative. By facilitating the dialogues, girls also demonstrated their leadership in public. Each event highlighted selected issues such as girls' education, employment, participation in sports, employment, girls' mobility and delayed marriage.[59]

● **Amra-o-Korchi (We are also doing):** This promoted equitable sharing of domestic tasks between males and females, so girls would have more time to study. The programme found examples of boys and men helping with cooking, cleaning and child care and highlighted these to show it was already happening within the community. Public competitions enabled boys and young men to showcase their skills, raise visibility and celebrate those who crossed gender boundaries in housework. These competitions were followed by open dialogues about perceptions of household work and men's responsibilities, and encouraged more involvement by men.

● **Engaging men in relaxed settings:** The programme initially had difficulty reaching men, who were usually at work during the day, when community visits were conducted. The project identified tea stalls as a common spot where men and older boys gathered to rest and chat while enjoying tea. Staff visited tea stalls in convenient locations, often near markets or along roads connecting villages, where men often gathered and felt comfortable. Here, staff conducted a series of dialogues in which they highlighted the variations of thought that already existed and showed that the opinions within the community were already more diverse than the men might have expected.

The programme achieved significant impacts on girls' agency, i.e. self-efficacy measured by assessing how their confidence about achieving their life goals in education, health care, mobility, marriage and income earning increased over the lifecycle of the programme, and the Plus component contributed significantly to positive changes in social norms around girls' mobility and decision-making regarding marriage.

Ways forward: Within the Child Marriage/Gender Transformative Accelerator tool, UNICEF could invest in interventions that promote community level enabling environment.

Effective programmes that addess gender norms and stereotypes

Gender norms are deeply entrenched and widely held beliefs about gender roles, power relations, and the standards and practices that govern human behaviours in a particular social context and at a particular time. They encompass commonly held ideas and assumptions about how children, adolescents and adults of all genders are meant to act and be in their communities and societies based on their gender.

Programmes in the South Asia region use a combination of strategies to achieve norms change, including safe spaces, media and public education campaigns, intergenerational and community dialogues, peer education, mentorship, parenting programmes and digital campaigns, among others. Successful programmes use these and other strategies to: 1) create alternative or new, less restrictive norms; 2) support girls and other members of the community to challenge existing norms; 3) promote public discussion or discourse about existing norms and their effects or 4) eliminate norm-based restrictions and discrimination in policies, laws and institutions. Changing norms is notoriously difficult to achieve or measure in short-term programmes as it requires ongoing, sustained and flexible investments in the grassroots networks, organizations and advocates that make up a movement for equality. Many of these norms-change strategies are effective in shifting attitudes and behaviours but longer term evaluation and investment is required to identify impacts.

Changing norms through sport, India

Parivartan for Girls, a sports-based norms-change intervention, was designed by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and implemented by Apnalaya in Mumbai, India. The project targeted norms that restrict girls' liberty to move and gather freely in public spaces by engaging young women as mentors to walk with girls to community spaces where they then participate in sports and other activities. The project simultaneously engaged parents in reflection sessions designed to explore their discomfort at having girls move freely in public and challenge restrictive norms.

At the end of the programme, girls, their families and the community all participated in a public sports day and achievement ceremony. By increasing the visibility of girls, and by both challenging norms and engaging parents to reflect on them, Parivartan for Girls successfully encouraged girls and their families to resist social sanctions from neighbours in their community.[60]

Ways forward: UNICEF could support, scale up or emulate this gender-transformative programme.

15-year-old Ruma, a Rohingya refugee girl and a great footballer plays at the UNICEF-supported social hub where she makes friends with Bangladeshi girls.

© UNICEF/UN0749977/Kiron

Challenging harmful norms through intergenerational dialogue, Pakistan

The **Community Intergenerational Dialogue** intervention in Pakistan challenged harmful norms around culturally sensitive issues like child marriage, early pregnancy and reproductive health in around 280 villages. The programme used a community-driven approach and engaged community-based organizations to host dialogues involving important community stakeholders in the community, including parents, community leaders, religious leaders and boys and men.

By involving all key stakeholders within the community, these dialogues created a space for critical conversations about deeply ingrained social norms. Through these discussions, participants could challenge and question existing practices, allowing for collective reflection on the harmful consequences of such norms. The programme fostered an environment that encouraged long-term systemic change towards challenging and dismantling harmful social norms, particularly around child marriage.

Ways forward: UNICEF could support, scale up or emulate this gender-transformative programme.

Approaches to adolescent girls' skills, agency and empowerment

Agency is defined as the individual's ability to make free, informed choices and to act based on those choices. It requires freedom from coercion, violence or the threat of violence; and access to education. To exercise agency, girls and other marginalized adolescents need autonomy, including bodily autonomy, and to build individual skills, such as confidence, literacy and decision-making; social skills, including negotiation and assertiveness; and the skills needed to pursue further education, health, employment and other ambitions. Empowerment is defined as the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire the resources, assets, skills, opportunities and agency to uphold and use that ability. Promoting empowerment for adolescent girls requires investment in an enabling environment that supports and respects their participation and voice in decision-making, and in building their skills to understand and uphold their human rights and pursue meaningful improvements in their lives and well-being.

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"At first I had no skills but now I can do tailoring and support my family financially," says Zarifa, 18.
Adolescent girls in Shish Village, Daikundi Province graduated from their 5-month vocational training program in March 2022, specializing in tailoring. UNICEF supports 10 vocational training centres like the one in Shish Village in 10 different districts, with each catering to a different vocation for girls 13-21 years old.

Ultimately, progress for girls in the South Asia region will depend on the ability of girls to lead, and the support they receive for their leadership from their families, communities and environment. Agency and empowerment are vital to the progression from childhood to adulthood, and girls, in particular, are surrounded during adolescence by norms, social messages and stereotypes that influence and interfere with their self-confidence, self-efficacy and ability to make self-determined decisions about their lives. UNICEF's global Gender Policy specifically highlights girls' agency and leadership, calling for:

> "
> **A world where children, adolescents, and adults co-create and model new and more equitable systems of power; where all children and adolescents – and especially girls – claim their equal right to well-being, fulfilment, and contribution to sustainable development; and where girls and women are recognized and supported as leaders, innovators, change-makers, and prob-lem-solvers, thereby securing the founda-tions of civil and political liberties during their lives and through future generations.[61]**
> "

Most UNICEF and partner programming in the region has the empowerment of girls, adolescents or young people as a specific objective, while still more work with girls and other adolescents to build life, digital and other skills. However, little programming explicitly targets girls' agency. To promote lasting change for adolescent girls and to position and support them to lead initiatives for their own development, UNICEF needs to expand its understanding of, and work for, the agency of adolescent girls in the region. This will require significant investments in building gender capacity and in clarifying values for staff and partners who continue to express discomfort with key elements of girls' agency, such as their rights, bodily autonomy or sexuality, and

for those who are unfamiliar with or untrained in power analysis and transfer of power.

Among programmes and initiatives working towards girls' empowerment and skills, four specific approaches stand out: 1) the use of safe spaces for girls to deliver peer support, skills development and mentorship; 2) community-based education for out-of-school girls; 3) comprehensive sexuality education; and 4) livelihoods and employment skills programming.

Supporting girls' leadership, voice, and participation requires not only building girls' skills, but also shifting towards a movement-building strategy that supports girls as change agents in their own right. UNICEF has multiple opportunities to foster girls' movements through its funding and mentoring resources, including through investments in partner-led projects to build leadership and advocacy skills, directly supporting youth networks, or directly funding girls' organizations and collectives. UNICEF could also leverage its own position with governments and in decision-making spaces to ensure meaningful and inclusive representation of girls and young feminists in policy and programme discussions.

Students of Laya Middle Secondary School learn to weave the bamboo hat that girls and women of Laya wear as part of their traditional customs in Bhutan.

Mentoring adolescent girls to develop social and financial skills, Nepal (UNICEF)

Rupantaran ('transformation') is a government-endorsed holistic programme aimed at empowering marginalized adolescent girls in Nepal, through weekly sessions conducted by young social mobilizers and youth facilitators over a period of 6–9 months. The programme develops the social and financial skills of adolescent girls and has shown results in building both capacity and confidence. Its provision of mentoring enables girls to strengthen their knowledge, skills and attitudes, negotiate safe sex, become resilient, apply financial skills, identify gender-based violence and negotiate with families against harmful practices such as child marriage and dowry. The programme has demonstrated potential for scale up across the country and has strong local commitment and ownership. Ward offices and municipalities fund the cost of facilitators, make grants available to girls to access economic empowerment activities, integrate content from the Rupantaran training package into local curricula and support out-of-school girls to enrol or re-enrol in formal schools. Rupantaran content is currently being digitized to make it more accessible and facilitate scale up.

Ways forward: UNICEF could enhance the leadership of adolescent girls by involving them in programme design, implementation and evaluation, further increase the focus on girls' agency by directly targeting norms that connect girls' value to marriage and reproduction, and integrate a focus on sexuality and bodily autonomy.

Adolescent girls participate in the Rupantaran life-skills training package supported by UNICEF in Krishna Tole in Surkhet District in Nepal's far West.

Case study 5

Culturally acceptable safe spaces for girls Afghanistan (UNICEF)

Women and Girls' Safe Spaces, a UNICEF programme in Afghanistan, has provided a sense of belonging and solidarity to girls, especially in the current situation where severe restrictions have been imposed on them. These safe spaces are the only interventions for adolescent girls that have some level of acceptability, and this culturally sensitive approach can be used as entry points for multiple services.

In 2022, UNICEF reached over 200,000 women and girls through these spaces, providing a package of information and services including gender equality and empowerment sessions, health information (immunization and nutrition) and services, education programmes including literacy classes, life skills and income-generation skills, psychosocial support and GBV information and referral. UNICEF also set up networks of men and boys around the safe spaces to increase their safety and social acceptability and to catalyse the transformation of toxic notions of masculinity.

Ways forward: UNICEF is using safe spaces to reach adolescent girls in Afghanistan with much-needed education, skills and health programming. Given the current political situation, UNICEF programming should not attempt to change any project that is still allowed to operate, lest there be blowback and a further narrowing of space for women and girls.

» Interventions that reach out-of-school girls

Approximately one in three adolescent girls who should be attending upper-secondary school are out of school and need support through informal, vocational and technical or skills-based training. While UNICEF has made considerable progress in improving the enrolment and retention of adolescent girls in formal education, more investments are needed in informal, community-based education and skills initiatives that are accessible for out-of-school girls. UNICEF has considerable experience in providing skills training through informal community and girls' groups, safe spaces and youth centres, and can invest in the expansion of these programmes in areas where there are large concentrations of out-of-school adolescent girls.

Case study 6

Learning spaces for out-of-school girls, multiple countries (UNICEF)

Alternative Learning Pathway (ALP) and **Accelerated Education Programme (AEP)** centres in Bangladesh and Pakistan have increased educational access for adolescent girls who are out of school and lack access to formal education. These centres have been essential to reach out-of-school girls and have emerged as a safe spaces where girls can acquire knowledge and skills in a supportive environment. By offering flexible schedules and tailored curricula, these centres address the specific needs of out-of-school girls, empowering them to continue their education and gain valuable skills. Access to education not only has enhanced girls' agency and self-confidence but has also equipped them with the knowledge and tools to make informed decisions about their lives. These centres have the potential for scale-up and expansion and can also be used to provide other services like sexual and reproductive health, mental health counselling and nutrition.

Ways forward: This UNICEF approach could better meet the needs of adolescent girls by encouraging girls to state their needs and articulate what additional supports and services would be beneficial for them. Curricula and materials used in ALP and AEP projects should be responsive to girls, while also targeting and shifting gender norms and spreading knowledge about the skills and types of education that are available.

Ostad-shagird: a model for inclusive programming, Bangladesh (UNICEF)

"A positive initiative has been noted in '**ostad-shagird**' model [in Bangladesh] focusing on out-of-school adolescents with more than 60% participation of girls with the inclusion of [persons with disabilities] and transgender contributing to reducing child marriage. This is an alternate model of education that focuses on group-based peer learning and facilitates an informal education framework. Vulnerable populations like children with disabilities, out-of-school adolescent girls and transgender young adults are part of the target audience for this programme. This programme is effective both for contributing to a decrease in child marriages among out-of-school adolescent girls and as an education programme for vulnerable, marginalized children."[62]

Ways forward: UNICEF could scale up the ostad-shagird model for inclusive adolescent programming in other sectors, specifically targeting adolescent girls from marginalized communities.

Quality learning and positive aspirations through non-formal education, Nepal (UNICEF)

A UNICEF partnership resulted in **Girls' Access To Education (GATE)**, a non-formal education programme targeting out-of-school girls in Nepal. About 89 per cent of GATE girls enrolled in grades 3–5 in formal schools scored higher in reading and mathematics than their non-GATE peers. GATE facilitators played a key role in convincing parents to enrol their daughters in school. All 29 girls with disabilities completed the programme. Girls who participated in GATE had positive career aspirations, such as wanting to become teachers, doctors and railway engineers. The estimated cost per participant was low, in order to prepare for transition to formal schooling.[63]

Ways forward: UNICEF could scale up the GATE programme to reach more marginalized girls and connect them to education, and also use it to address the norms and stigma that contribute to the exclusion of some girls.

Adolescent girls and boys gather in the Plan-It Youth Resource Center.

» Comprehensive sexuality education

Comprehensive sexuality education is an evidence-based approach to expanding adolescents' life skills, empowerment and agency by supporting them to make decisions about their lives and health based on accurate and complete information. In partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UNICEF country offices work with governments and other stakeholders to promote and expand access to comprehensive sexuality education for adolescent girls, both in and out of school. Most countries in the region have included elements of comprehensive sexuality education in their adolescent health policies, but programmes tend to be narrowly focused on the prevention of unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and HIV, with limited discussion on gender and the prevention of violence. Moreover, it is widely delivered only at the secondary level, when many girls begin to leave school. In order to be comprehensive, sexuality education must include components on relationships, sexual rights, gender, prevention of violence, sexual health and well-being, human body and development, sexuality and sexual behaviours and sexual and reproductive health; and cover girls aged 5–18 years and beyond.[64] A recent review of comprehensive sexuality education in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka found that none of the countries included topics related to sexual pleasure, that only one country (Sri Lanka) covered diversity and discrimination faced by adolescents of different sexual orientations. Only Bangladesh and India explicitly addressed sexual rights in their curricula.[65]

» Livelihoods and transferable life skills

Much of UNICEF's portfolio benefiting adolescent girls is focused on skills development, which can be further subcategorized into interventions to develop life skills, digital skills or skills for employment

Case study 9

Rights-based sexuality education curriculum for adolescents, India

Since 2011, the **YP Foundation** has been delivering rights-based and youth-centric comprehensive sexuality education in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and the Delhi National Capital Region, India, to address the needs and concerns of adolescents. The YP Foundation has created an intersectional, queer-feminist, stigma-free and pleasure-centric curriculum for adolescents aged 14 years and above. This gives young people information about body anatomy, puberty and the physical, emotional and social changes that come with it. Further, it discusses topics such as attraction, consent, relationships, identities, power, violence, safe sexual practices, contraception and abortion.

The curriculum has been successfully offered to more than 13,000 young people in school and community settings.[66]

Ways forward: UNICEF could adopt and disseminate this sex-positive approach to comprehensive sexuality education, advocate for its use with national governments and collaborate with or support the YP Foundation to work with regional youth organizations and adapt this curriculum for use in other countries in South Asia.

and livelihoods. Life-skills programmes tend to work in partnership with peer education, mentorship and safe spaces initiatives to promote adolescent sexual and reproductive health and other health outcomes, or girls' decision-making and negotiation skills to reduce risk to CEFM.

UNICEF and partners are rapidly expanding their digital skills portfolios in nearly every country in the region, with the most common strategies being developing basic digital skills, training to safely navigate online spaces, youth-led digital campaigns and the development of digital platforms to distribute information and link girls to resources. Digital skills programmes tend to overlap or collaborate with interventions designed to increase girls' employment, livelihoods and financial literacy skills. Opportunities to improve UNICEF's use of digital skills programmes to advance gender equality are explored in more detail in the Strategic Investments section of this chapter.

UNICEF also invests heavily in community-based education as part of its skills development work, as a vital strategy for reaching out-of-school girls in all countries in the region. Community-based education and skills development programmes are promising interventions to meet girls' diverse educational needs. UNICEF-supported skills development programmes can more explicitly focus on promoting resilience through building adolescent skills in developing healthy relationships, understanding and embracing their identities; exercising their agency and developing their sense of belonging, commitment to social justice and culture.[67]

Case study 10

Socio-ecological approaches for girls' empowerment, Kutch, Gujarat, India

The UNICEF-supported gender-transformative **Sathvaro** programme used community-based structures, such as school management committees, self-help groups, front-line workers and adolescent boys' and girls' groups to develop adolescent girls' agency and empower them with a sense of "I can do". The programme worked across levels of the socio-ecological model to create an enabling environment for girls at the community, village, district and state levels. The programme was structured around the core objectives of nurturing a deep understanding among adolescents of gender as a driver and a stumbling block in adolescent empowerment, fostering trust and shifting rigid gender norms, unequal power dynamics and discriminatory social structures through dialogues and creating a cadre of Gender Parivartaks (village volunteers) for close observation and sharing information about violence and harassment in school and at their homes.[68]

Ways forward: UNICEF can further scale and leverage existing community structures to mainstream the girls' empowerment agenda at multiple levels.

Girls huddle together to interact with youth facilitators at a career fair organized at their school as part of Plan-It Girls

⟫ Girls' leadership and advocacy

Youth leadership is a crucial element of the right to participation. For decades, youth movements across sectors have been active in shaping United Nations policy and programmes, such as promoting access to education, bodily autonomy, and sexual and reproductive health and rights.[69] While the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do not include a specific goal on youth, they integrate youth across the targets and indicators of six SDGs, including those relating to health, education, gender equality and climate change, and gave rise to Youth 2030, the first United Nations youth strategy, launched in 2018.

UNICEF's Regional Strategic Framework for Adolescent Girls in South Asia recognizes the pivotal role they play in shifting social norms and influencing policy frameworks given the space and an enabling environment to speak out on issues that affect them.[70] Supporting girls' leadership, voice and agency is the first priority in this framework, recognizing both the role of girls' leadership in transformative change, and the historical lack of investment in their meaningful participation and leadership.

The value of girls' participation and leadership in determining programming and advocacy goals is increasingly recognized. UNICEF and partners have invested in girls' leadership through implementing human-centred design, supporting youth networks and peer education programmes, and providing direct financial support to youth and girl-led advocacy and programmes on sexual and reproductive health and rights, climate resilience and ending violence against girls. UNICEF contributions in this area primarily centre on support for peer education and mentorship programmes, in local or regional youth councils, or through youth-led digital campaigns.

Youth 2030 recommends two primary routes through which to engage with and promote the leadership of young people:
- working with young people to co-shape and co-deliver United Nations initiatives
- enabling young people's self-directed initiatives[71]

The analysis below is organized according to these routes, though some strategies, such as expanded partnerships or investments in youth networks, may support both pathways.

Case study 11

ADVIKA platform, Odisha, India

ADVIKA (meaning "every girl is unique") is a convergent, multi-stakeholder and holistic programme empowering adolescent girls, aiming to end child marriage and all forms of violence against girls. The state-wide programme in Odisha supported by UNICEF and UNFPA is envisaged as a common platform for linking all schemes targeted at girls from rural and urban areas, in and out of school. The programme combines strategies designed to advance girls' empowerment, increase community engagement and transformation, strengthen systems, and engage with policies and legislation on girls' rights. The vibrant, adolescent-friendly 'Kishori Diwas' (Saturday sessions) include life skill education to help girls deal with their day-to-day challenges and create a space to express themselves. The platform successfully reached 1 million adolescent girls and boys with information and programmes on the rights of children, sexual and reproductive health, gender, child protection, nutrition, and digital literacy.

Ways forward: UNICEF could further scale Advika's approach to design programmes targeting girls and meeting their multi-sectoral needs holistically.

> "
> **The UN recognizes it cannot achieve its mission without partnering with young people and ensuring they are not only heard but understood, not only engaged but empowered, and not only supporting but leading global efforts and processes. Young people need to be full-fledged partners in the United Nations work to build a better world for all, as they are both beneficiaries and partners.**
>
> **– Youth 2030:**
> **United Nations Youth Strategy**[68]
> "

Youth networking for advocacy, multiple countries

Y-Peer, the Youth Peer Education Network, is a ground-breaking youth-to-youth initiative supported by UNFPA, consisting of more than 500 non-profit organizations and governmental institutions in multiple countries. Its membership includes thousands of young people working in many areas, including those involving adolescent sexual and reproductive health. Y-Peer builds partnerships between young people and adults by advocating for national youth development strategies; increased access to information, knowledge and services on sexual and reproductive health; and sharing lessons learned across borders and between cultures. UNFPA and its partners have leveraged their investments in developing young people's advocacy and leadership skills through Y-Peer to draw on inclusive and intersectional youth expertise across a range of issues and sectors.

Ways forward: It is critical that UNICEF create a mechanism for an ongoing relationship with adolescent girls, and Y-Peer offers a model or opportunity. UNICEF could follow the Y-Peer model to create a youth network of adolescent girls or a youth advisory board to inform programming, or work with UNFPA to co-sponsor and support Y-Peer.

A group of indigenous adolescent girls weaving cloths during their training session at UNICEF's Vocational Training Center in Khori Khula, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

Direct funding for adolescent girls' advocates, multiple countries, Nepal

Access to decision-making forums for adolescent girls' advocates is crucial to ensuring accountability to their needs. Recognizing this, **Purposeful,** a Global South-led funding organization, established the Generation Equality Forum Girls' Fund to support girls and young feminist-led collectives to engage with the Generation Equality process. Using a participatory, girl-led funding practice, with a peer-led model to support girls on deciding on which projects receive funding, Purposeful distributed small grants of US$ 5,000 to 28 activists and collectives across the world.

One recipient, Planet Access Nepal, used the grant to conduct advocacy trainings led by and for girls with disabilities to influence action coalitions and their local decision-makers, leveraging the funding for greater impact:. As Laxmi, a Planet Access Nepal representative explained, "They [girls with disabilities] need to know about the laws and policies and need to build confidence in themselves to speak for their rights to the local government. That's why we conducted the Training of Trainers… now they are ready to take their issues forward… local campaigners have been produced."[73]

Ways forward: UNICEF could support girls and young feminist-led collectives, with adolescent girls having real decision-making power over budgets and programmes.

14-year-old Malikanu took life skill training where she learned the importance of inclusion, participation, empathy and communication.

Scaling up access to digital spaces for adolescent girls

As the world becomes increasingly reliant on digital skills for education, employment and socializing, adolescent girls must also get opportunities to develop digital literacy. Digital literacy is an essential skill for many jobs with earning potential, and can be a catalyst for new economic opportunities.[74] The Global System for Mobile Communications Association found that women are 36 per cent less likely than men to have access to the internet. Globally, the vast majority of men (94 per cent) own a mobile phone, while less than two thirds (62 per cent) of women own their own phone.[75] Between 2020 and 2022, the gender gap in mobile internet access increased most radically in South Asia, from 35 per cent to 41 per cent.[76] This wide gap is related to the different rates of mobile internet adoption by men and women. The proportion of male mobile internet users in India grew to 50 per cent, while staying stable for women at 30 per cent.[77]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF and the International Telecommunications Union estimated that 80 per cent of South Asia's school-aged children lacked access to the internet at home.[78] In a regional U-Report survey from South Asia, 1 in 2 respondents reported they owned the device they used most frequently for distance learning, and 45 per cent said that they used someone else's device.[79] The proportion of respondents who rated their quality of distance learning experience as very good or good was the highest among students who used their own device, a sibling's device, or one provided by their school. The respondents who used a neighbour's or a parent's device, by contrast, rated their distance learning experience poor or very poor). This indicates that quality of experience and meaningful inclusion is not guaranteed by access alone, but is also depends on flexible, regular and extended access.

While much of UNICEF's work in the South Asia region seeks to address gaps in digital access, it could benefit from more directly targeting the gendered digital divide and its underlying gender norms. Existing strategies to expand adolescent access to digital technology and skills should be scaled up with an eye towards gender parity in investment and reach, with additional investments in changing norms in both digital and physical spaces.

» Digital access and skills for girls

UNICEF and partners use multiple strategies to target and mainstream investments in expanding digital skills among adolescents. Several country offices have leveraged their influence with governments in the education sector to expand the provision of digital technologies in schools and integrate digital learning and skills into student and teacher curricula, an at-scale investment that promises rapid progress for in-school adolescents. Countries are also using safe spaces, peer mentorship and skills programmes to work with out-of-school or older adolescents, frequently specifically targeting girls' digital literacy, coding and financial skills to bridge the employment gap. Where paired with gender analysis and specific strategies to reach

Kiran Barik, 18, and Sneha Sethi, 18, both confident adolescents help other girls and boys how to use and register themselves on the 'Advika app during their monthly 'Advika' session at the Anganwadi centre in Harijan Sahi, Ganjam district, Odisha, India.

marginalized and hard-to-reach girls, these investments will likely have positive impacts for adolescent girls.

While digital investments continue to be a priority for UNICEF, government, and the private sector, more can be done to leverage this to ensure access for adolescent girls through scaled up targeted initiatives. There is also a need to expand the scope of digital skills from basic computer skills to income-generating skills. In Bangladesh, participants of a BRAC livelihoods programme for out-of-school youth who had received ICT training expressed a desire for more training that went beyond the basic computer literacy skills.[80]

Additionally, further analysis is needed to understand intersectional dynamics: which girls have access to what technology, and how they use it. Many digital programmes or digital solutions, such as mobile phone apps for menstrual health or chatbots for mental health support, would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of who their users are.

Girls use mobile phones as a primary tool to access the internet, but often don't have use of their own phone.[81] Women tend to have more access to so-called feature-phones, which provide only basic features such as text messaging and voice-based calls.[82]

Furthermore, digital literacy programmes rely on basic literacy, and are frequently only available in dominant or regional languages, not in local languages or scripts. Some of those interviewed for this review also noted that radio and television remain important tech-enabled strategies to broaden reach to those who do not have access to mobile phone.

A group of adolescent girls explore learning through digital literacy at school, Madhyamik Vidyalaya, Bajitpur, Kalyanpur Panchayat, Patna, Bihar, India

Case study 14

Integrating digital skills into a new national curriculum, Bhutan

In 2021, UNICEF partnered with the Ministry of Education in Bhutan to roll out a new **national curriculum** that responds to the gaps and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The new curriculum is driven by competency standards and IT skills while reducing reliance on textbooks and other physical resources that are out of reach for home-based students during a crisis.[83] Alongside the new curriculum, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education rolled out new professional standards for teachers to equip them to integrate new, adaptable and technology-competent pedagogical approaches. The IT curriculum for adolescents includes both basic digital literacy and coding and programming skills to equip older students for careers in tech, and works alongside the UNICEF PI-Top programme in youth centres which creates space for adolescents to build their own digital apps.[84]

Ways forward: This initiative targets adolescents in general, with no specific attention to meeting the needs of adolescent girls. UNICEF should establish a system of consultation with adolescent girls, with enough time and resources to include them in programme design.

Addressing masculinities and engaging men and boys

Masculinities are the plural and dynamic ways that norms, attitudes, power dynamics, identities and practices related to being male are lived as a result of gender socialization, and which shape how men and boys are expected to behave and interact with others in a particular society at a particular time. Harmful masculinities are the sanctioned ideals around primary gender roles and socialization that uphold patriarchal codes and power structures that value men and boys over women and girls, and which require men to maintain dominant, aggressive and violent behaviours in order to be considered 'real men'. By contrast, positive masculinities are norms and expressions that promote shared value, equality, and freedoms among children, adolescents and adults of all

"But I now believe that it is the right thing and will continue doing it" says Jayesh from Gujarat, whose parents said that he should not engage in domestic work as a man. The Sathvaro programme (Gujarat, India) encourages gender equality through a focus on positive masculinities and works with men and boys consistently as catalysts.

Case study 15

Engaging men and boys in India

A review of the **Mainstreaming Positive Masculinity within Public Programmes in Assam, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh** programme[85] reveals that in India, the engagement with men and boys is integrated within the GPECM programming across seven states. The programming is relatively new and involves engagement with men and boys through interventions focused on challenging harmful masculinities that are piloted across different community settings, youth platforms and educational institutions. Some early policy wins resulted from the integration of this approach in the national flagship scheme *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao.* While there are many challenges to engagement of men and boys both separately and in mixed groups, the focus should be on the sustainable integration the approach into programming to ensure long-term shift in norms and attitudes as well as perceptions and behaviours of men and boys.

Lesson learned: Engaging men any boys as standalone interventions is a crucial element of gender-transformative programming to ensure a shift from their perceived roles as gatekeepers to champions of gender equality.

genders. Progress towards gender equality is dependent on engaging men and boys as well as girls and women in re-imagining gender norms, expectations and power relations.

The conversation around promoting gender equality has recently has shifted towards promoting positive masculinities as opposed to simply engaging men and boys as gatekeepers and protectors of girls and women. An important distinction is made between involving men and boys in programmes to raise awareness about the challenges girls face, engaging them in their capacity as protectors of daughters and wives, and involving them in critical analysis of the ways that rigid gender norms inhibit their own lives.

Engaging men and boys to address violent or restrictive expressions of masculinity is a strategic priority for UNICEF and a crucial component of any intervention promoting gender equality. The importance of male engagement was highlighted by UNICEF country office staff and partners throughout the review, frequently in the context of the need to engage influential men, such as community leaders, fathers or authority figures, to better support and protect girls and women. However, concerns were raised about the content and purpose of such engagement, especially when men are engaged primarily as protectors of women and girls. Instead, men should be engaged as partners and allies who can contribute to gender equality and also benefit from it, since they are also harmed and restricted by patriarchal norms.

UNICEF staff, partners and other stakeholders highlighted that a missing element in the current discussion relates to engaging men around positive masculinities, power sharing and dismantling patriarchal social norms. The content of male engagement initiatives is particularly important for promoting adolescent girls' agency and empowerment, as patriarchal control and norms around gender are key drivers of negative outcomes for girls.

While UNICEF country offices seek to work with men and boys to promote gender equality, they struggle to use these initiatives to transform patriarchal norms that undermine gender equality. There is an opportunity to invest in developing tools and methodologies that systematically address this, rather than keeping engagement at a superficial level.

Case study 16

Single-sex approaches to engage men and boys, India (UNICEF)

The Udaan initiative is part of the UNICEF-UNFPA joint Global Programme to End Child Marriage and includes life-skills building, created safe spaces and worked with families, men and boys, and other village and state-level stakeholders. In Udaan, the male engagement component is being structured from a positive masculinity lens. the initial engagement revolves around including men and boys in discussions on gender roles and gender discrimination in schools and at home and encouraging them to take positive actions in their communities. The intervention had six components (strengthening core community participation structures, convergence with line departments, community engagement, social protection for vulnerable and marginalized girls, focusing on adolescents, and working with other stakeholders). UNICEF and its implementing partners formed, revived and strengthened 3,847 adolescent girls' groups (comprising 43,396 girls) and 1,512 adolescent boys' groups (comprising 11,276 boys), focusing on capacity building.

Ways forward: UNICEF could use the Udaan approach to directly address gender norms that validate toxic masculinities and work with boys to question the power and privilege of men and boys.

Girls from Pallekanugala Kanishka School, Srilanka, show off their cricket skills to UNICEF Regional Goodwill Ambassador for South Asia, Sachin Tendulkar.

Finding 6

Enabling environment: family and community engagement

Communities are groups composed of individuals who share a context or physical space, social ties and interactions, and a sense of self-definition as part of a social group. Individuals may exist in multiple communities simultaneously or over the course of a lifetime, and are deeply influenced and defined by the gender norms and expectations of social groups in their communities. Community mobilization includes a spectrum of activities and involves engaging small and large social and affinity groups, including families , faith groups, racial and ethnic communities, communities defined by shared experiences and values, a common language or media or a defined physical location. Community mobilization activities are designed to influence the environment in which individuals make and take action based on their choices.

Creating an enabling environment for adolescent girls within their communities is a key strategy to support them to develop and exercise their agency. UNICEF and partners have worked within communities and with community leaders, including local political leaders, faith leaders and social influencers to identify and reach at-risk girls. Community engagement is crucial to ensuring resources and services are available at the level where they are most accessible and needed for adolescent girls, as well as for shifting restrictive norms and reducing backlash against girls who stand up and advocate for themselves.

UNICEF and partners have employed outreach and intergenerational dialogues with various stakeholders, public events and workshops, promotion of role models and mentors for adolescent girls, capacity building and values clarification training with faith leaders, local policy advocacy, and other community engagement strategies. Community engagement strategies have been known to be effective at reducing resistance to girls' empowerment, promoting girls' leadership and engagement within local government

Case study 17

Supporting and celebrating parents to help their child develop, Sri Lanka (UNICEF)

To help Sri Lanka parents give the best start to their children, UNICEF launched **www.betterparenting.lk**, a Sinhala, Tamil and English website that brings together articles, videos and animations to provide comprehensive expert information on childcare, child development, food and nutrition and health. UNICEF also launched the **Parent Superpower** advertising campaign, featuring three Sri Lankan celebrities – renowned singer and musician Romesh Sugathapala, radio personality Shaq (Riyaz Shah Jahan) and actress and former Miss Sri Lanka Sachini Ayendra – each of whom has young children. Directed by Ilango Ram, the three 60-second films showed how every parent possesses the 'superpower' to help their child develop.

Ways forward: These UNICEF initiatives could incorporate gender-transformative messaging, including on increasing men's role in childcare, countering traditional gender norms and supporting and empowering girls to make their own decisions.

through youth committees, and identifying at-risk girls and reaching them with services and resources.[86] UNICEF has used these strategies to target girls' access to resources and to scale up child protection programmes, but is yet to unlock their potential to create an enabling environment for girls' agency and to change norms. Some strategies target existing influencers and decision-makers to use their power to protect girls but others fail to question whether that power is being shifted towards girls' ability to make their own decisions and take action based on their own choices. These can fall short of being gender-transformative, and may even recreate or reinforce patriarchal norms that harm girls in the long term.

≫ Positive parenting

UNICEF has had considerable success with positive parenting interventions targeting reduction in family violence, promotion of girls' education, shifting of household gender norms, and promotion of girls' access to food and other household resources.[87] Frequently, positive parenting strategies are combined with cash transfer or cash plus interventions which can amplify impacts at the household level.

By the age of three, children begin to grasp the difference in behaviours associated with girls and boys and their understanding of the expectations determined by gender norms solidifies as they grow older. Gender-transformative parenting is a useful strategy to reach children in the early stages of childhood development, before expectations about appropriate behaviours set in. While traditional family support programmes which target resources at the household level or through community services, positive parenting programmes generally build parents' knowledge, skills and attitudes with the goal of reducing violence and promoting gender equity within the household.[88] This approach works with parents to recognize their own gender biases and avoid transferring them to their children, while promoting positive gender norms and socialization to transform power structures in future generations. Positive parenting has also been shown to improve the mental health of children.[89]

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'When I first began my apprenticeship, the boys would say: "If you can't do something, tell me."' Neeshan said. The 17-year-old is the only female on the construction site and works every day to defy traditional gender norms. 'By the time I finished, they would say: "Neeshan, can you do this for me?" I was proud of that.'

≫ Media and public education

Many programmes contain media and public information or education components. Some of these components are intended to achieve a specific outcome, while others are designed to shift norms, beliefs and myths or to create alternative social narratives. UNICEF and partners have demonstrated success using radio, television and social media campaigns in preventing CEFM and promoting sexual and reproductive health

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🔍 Case study 18

Communication to change perceptions of mental health issues, Maldives (UNICEF)

The Government of Maldives and UNICEF jointly launched the **National Mental Health Communications Strategy and Campaign**, led by the Health Protection Agency in December 2022. The goal was to optimize mental health outcomes in Maldives and for all partners to work together to improve the mental health and well-being of beneficiaries. The campaign aimed to promote social and behavioural change around perceptions of, and attitudes towards, mental health issues with the main objectives of improving individual resilience,

including self-care, coping strategies, and reducing mental health stigma, using a holistic approach. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF has worked with partners to help safeguard the mental health and psychosocial well-being of children, adolescents, parents and caregivers in Maldives, with a special focus on the most vulnerable. This complements UNICEF's long-standing work across different sectors including child protection, education and health.

Ways forward: UNICEF could specifically target gendered differences in mental health stigma and the needs of adolescent girls and those with disabilities.

and rights, menstrual health and hygiene, and better nutrition and health outcomes. Increasingly, UNICEF and partners are using public campaigns and social media to raise awareness on gender norms and mental health. Social and new media are particularly promising approaches to expand UNICEF's impact in various areas and shift harmful gendered social norms, transform livelihoods, equip women and girls with digital skills, improve adolescent mental health, and girls' voice and agency, particularly when created in partnership with, or led by, adolescent girls.

Finding 7

Systems and services

Restrictive gender norms contribute to and sustain barriers to necessary information and services for adolescent girls and marginalized children and adolescents. Exclusion resulting from formal or de jure discrimination, such as underinvestment and poor coverage of services in rural areas or urban slums, also contributes to unequal access. A gender-transformative approach uses multi-sectoral collaboration to eliminate gender barriers, GBV, stigma and discrimination and to increase access to education, skills-building, economic development, child and social protection, water and sanitation, cash or in-kind transfers for poverty alleviation, and health (including sexual and reproductive health, mental health, nutrition, vaccination, and health sector responses to violence) for all children and adolescents.

Girls' ability to make empowered choices about their lives, health and future relies on the ability of their community and country to provide accessible infrastructure, with services and systems that support those choices. Given the relative size of UNICEF programmes and investments in frontline capacity strengthening and expansion, as well as the agency's influence with governments, many of the advances that UNICEF has made in the region have been in the area of systems and services.[90] In the past 20 years, the South

Case study 19

Vulnerability mapping to link to essential services, Maldives (UNICEF)

In Maldives, **IBAMA** brings together community-based stakeholders on a single platform. The IBAMA team consists of social service providers (education, health, child protection), the police, and the newly elected local councils at atoll and island levels, including the Women's Development Committee, helping to reinforce the country's decentralization process. The key responsibility is to identify vulnerable children, women, men, the elderly and people with disabilities within the community and link them to the services they need, including addressing GBV. The IBAMA team coordinates stakeholders and ensures access to social services. The Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services has recognized this effort and assigned five state ministers for the 20 administrative atolls. Thus far, IBAMA has been established in 123 islands and nine atolls including three of the major cities outside Malé (Kulhudhufushi, Fuvahmulah and Addu). Under the guidance of the IBAMA team, each island will carry out a vulnerability mapping and develop a work plan.

Ways forward: UNICEF could emanate and scale up the IMABA model of integrating multiple forms of intersecting vulnerabilities into the mapping and use it to target discriminatory social and gender norms in other countries.

Asia region has seen significant advances in nearly every sector: school enrolment has improved, rates of CEFM have declined, access to clean drinking water, nutritious food and nutrition supplements have grown, and vaccine coverage has expanded.

UNICEF and partners have also invested significant resources into improving the capacity of frontline workers in all sectors to support the needs of adolescents and young people in a rights-based, gender-transformative

manner. Global guidance, tools, resources and partnerships are increasingly focused on the intersections of gender norms and adolescent development: in education, for example, both local and global movements increasingly advocate for looking beyond gender parity in enrolment or retention as a measure of equality, and instead ask for investments into research and programming to understand and address the lived realities of gender bias in educational settings.[91]

In South Asia, governments, UNICEF and civil society organizations have all begun to see evidence of the added value of integrating adolescent, child and youth-friendly approaches into programmes and training, including in health services, cash transfer and social protection programmes, child protection infrastructure improvements and education system strengthening. Many of these initiatives could be further improved by including a gender analysis and explicit reference to gender norms, or by integrating values clarification on gender and power into training and guidance tools. By adding a gender

component from the outset, UNICEF would use resources more efficiently and integrate gender into existing tool development and training efforts. However, this would require significantly scaled up investments in gender capacity by country offices, in the form of training, coordination and dedicated expertise. The UNICEF Gender Action Plan commits to expanding gender competency at all levels and in all sectors, by expanding access to training and values clarification opportunities for staff at all levels and the hiring and recruitment of staff with gender expertise in all sectors.[92]

Fatima is a nurse guiding pregnant women and girls and screening malnourished children at Guzarah Hospital in Herat Province, Afghanistan.

Case study 20

Capacity strengthening for adolescent-friendly health services, Nepal

The **Healthy Transitions for Nepali Youth** project, a multi-level intervention by Save the Children, used adolescent and youth-responsive needs assessments to evaluate the capacity of 40 health facilities in Karnali province, Nepal. Based on the assessment, the project connected service providers to certified trainers to enhance their capacity to provide comprehensive family planning counselling and services, adolescent sexual and reproductive health services, skilled birth assistance, community-based management of newborn and child health and use the district health information system. The trainings were supplemented by ongoing supportive supervision,

onsite coaching, monitoring and supervision visits and youth-led social accountability through soliciting adolescent and youth feedback on the quality and availability of services.

Through this comprehensive capacity-strengthening strategy for all available health services in the intervention area, adolescents experienced reduced barriers to services, and greater ability to improve knowledge, attitudes and behaviours around reproductive, maternal and newborn health among adolescent girls and young women.[93]

Ways forward: UNICEF could engage with the government and with Save the Children to scale up this project, or incorporate additional training for providers to promote gender equality as well as values clarification exercises into its own frontline worker initiatives.

» Strengthening frontline capacity

UNICEF works with government and civil society partners in the South Asia region to develop tools, resources and guidance for the provision of education, health, social and child protection services at the community level. These tools cover implementation, skill-building, frameworks for intervention designs and gender self-assessment, including gender-transformative implementation guidelines and monitoring tools. Interventions that build the skills and capacity of service providers can have immediate benefits for adolescent girls, and potentially transform norms and expectations to increase girls' voice and agency. Some of the most impactful initiatives include improvements in the training provided to community health workers to provide adolescent and youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, knowledge around maternal health, or to distribute health and nutrition supplementation. Other programmes have updated educational materials for schools, national curricula, and worked with teacher training institutions to include comprehensive sexuality education, remove gender stereotypes, and encourage girls to pursue knowledge and opportunities in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

» Inclusive and holistic mental health

Mental health is a relatively new area of work for many partners and governments in the region. There is thus a crucial opportunity to ensure that concerns about gender equality and disability rights are built into UNICEF mental health programmes from the beginning.

Government initiatives to address mental health in the South Asia region remain under-resourced, concentrated in urban centres, or deeply siloed. A recent review found that no child-specific mental health policies exist in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, and that only a few psychiatrists in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan offer specialized treatment or care for children or

Case study 21

A story-telling approach to mental health for GBV survivors, Afghanistan

A recent study conducted a series of **story-telling** workshops with women who had experienced domestic or intimate partner violence and were living in safe houses in Afghanistan. Researchers from the University of London partnered with a local women's network to conduct story-telling workshops and to interview participants about their experiences of story-telling and the benefits and challenges of telling stories about their experiences with violence. The study found that story-telling offers a means of shaping identity and social norms, and that story-telling about violence in a supported environment shifted and protected against stigma and self-blame. Participants expressed concern about the stigma associated with having experienced violence, and the potential for their stories to be used to cause ongoing harm, but also described the emotional experience after telling their stories as *subic*, denoting an embodied, cathartic feeling of 'being empty after having been full'.

The study showed the potential of story-telling in a protected, positive environment to relieve trauma, reaffirm positive social identities and feel reconnected to a community.[99]

Ways forward: UNICEF could integrate story-telling for mental health into existing safe spaces programmes to create a stronger sense of social support for girls, and explore story-telling and other non-medicalized strategies to address gendered mental health stressors such as bullying, body image and sexual harassment and violence.

adolescents.[94] In addition, there are significant gaps in data and research on mental health. Discussions of mental health are stigmatized in most countries, contributing to under-reporting and under-diagnosis of common mental health disorders, poor social and community understanding of mental health, and a lack of integrated training on mental health within

the health, education, social and child protection sectors.[95, 96, 97] As investments into mental health are scaled up in the South Asia region, two areas need particular attention in order to ensure that programmes and initiatives are accessible and available to adolescent girls:

- cross-sectoral investments targeting social determinants of poor mental health outcomes
- targeted programming addressing gendered drivers of mental health inequalities

Schools are crucial spaces for addressing the causes and outcomes of poor mental health. Investments into education-sector responses to mental health issues should include both whole-school approaches, such as social and emotional learning, and the identification and support of high-risk children and adolescents to connect them to care.[98] These programmes should also seek to improve the quality of education for all adolescents, including neurodiverse adolescents and adolescents with psychosocial disabilities, through teacher training and improved school environments that address bullying and stigma and expand opportunities for inclusive learning and social support.

Finding 8

Cash transfers and cash plus

Cash transfers or cash plus programmes are widely used social protection measures that distribute financial resources to households, families or individuals alongside information or services. Cash transfers are an evidence-based strategy to improve girls' enrolment and retention in schools, reduce family or household violence and delay marriage. UNICEF and partners in South Asia have used cash transfers and cash plus in multiple settings to target high-risk and economically excluded girls and their families.

⟫ Transforming education

Applying a gender-transformative approach to education means working across all parts of the education system, including policies, curriculum and materials, educational environment, teaching and pedagogy and community engagement "to transform stereotypes, attitudes, norms and practices by challenging power relations, rethinking gender norms and binaries, and raising critical consciousness about the root causes of inequality and systems of oppression".[100] UNICEF works with partners through the United Nations Girls Education Initiative and the Global Partnership for Education in many countries to eliminate negative stereotypes and gender inequality in curricula and to create safe and inclusive school environments for children and adolescents of all genders.

Case study 22

Supporting girls' education through cash transfers, Afghanistan (UNICEF)

The Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues at the United States Department of State is supporting adolescent girls' education through the **Afghan Women's Leadership Initiative**. This initiative aims to support and empower adolescent girls by supporting their education and preventing child marriage. The programme includes community engagement and mobilization to prevent child marriage and strengthen girls' education, safe spaces and life skills and livelihood training. The programme introduced a cash transfer component to reduce the impacts of conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable families, and to improve their access to basic services, especially girls' education.

Ways forward: Since girls' education post-secondary level was suspended, the way forward is a shift to direct resources to vulnerable families and girls and women confined in their homes.

The education sector received particular attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, as countries quickly mobilized to respond to school closures and other disruptions. Girls' access to education was a particular focus for all countries in the South Asia region, given the historic focus on girls' education as a right, as a location for services, and as protection from violence, CEFM and unwanted pregnancy. Responses had to be rapidly scaled up and integrate a gender-transformative approach, including investments in digital access and literacy, community engagement and mapping of at-risk households, and elements of UNICEF's social and child protection programming.

Case study 23

Skills and competency-based secondary education curriculum, Bangladesh (UNICEF)

In 2023, Bangladesh began to roll out a new skills and competency-based **national curriculum** for secondary school students. The curriculum incorporates a new emphasis on education for sustainable development and global citizenship, alongside a learner-centred teaching approach, standards for assessing and evaluating learning, and new topics on sexual and reproductive health and rights, nutrition and mental health and well-being, all with a focus on gender equality, reducing violence, stigma and discrimination in schools, and promoting accessibility. UNICEF and Generation Unlimited, along with partners, are supporting the National Curriculum and Textbook Board to roll out the curriculum alongside a digital and technology skills framework designed to increase linkages between education, skills training and employment.[101]

Ways forward: UNICEF could continue to scale up this project, evaluating its impact on gender norms.

Finding 9

Policy and structural change: institutional partnerships

partnerships that foster national laws and well-resourced policies to protect and promote the rights of adolescent girls can contribute to sustained shifts in gender norms. Partners can include national governments, academia, the private sector, civil society organization and networks of adolescent girls, women and marginalized groups. Successful partnerships promote evidence-based policies and innovative solutions that leverage additional resources and co-investments, including at sub-national level and for scale up. Institutional partnerships also facilitate shared learning spaces for stakeholders to learn from one another and replicate successful models in different contexts. Gender-transformative partnerships are led by staff that are committed to gender equality and have the expertise to promote empowerment and redistribute resources for women, girls and left-behind groups to address the drivers of poverty and intersectional oppressions.

Integrating gender, both as a theoretical and a methodological approach, is an important contribution to policy and institutional reform. Policy documents are socially constructed and their content represents ideas, understandings and assumptions about gender within a context. It is thus important to shape both what is problematized and what is unproblematized within a complex landscape, comprising multiple actors and focuses that may lack coherence, alignment and detailed gender analyses. In addressing gender inequality as a social and

> **Partnerships and integration is one of the weakest links in this (UNICEF) office.**
>
> **– KII, UNICEF staff**

structural determinant of adolescent health and well-being, researchers, policymakers and implementers should thus integrate gender-transformative approaches into the policy documents that form the foundation for reimagining policies and systems.

Collaboration with government agencies, ministries and departments is an important component of UNICEF advocacy for policies that prioritize adolescent girls' needs, and to support the implementation of programmes and initiatives with positive impacts on adolescent girls' lives. In India, UNICEF works with the Ministry of Women and Child Development to address issues such as child protection, nutrition and early childhood development. In Nepal, UNICEF has developed strategic partnerships with the Municipal Association of Nepal, the National Association of Rural Municipalities and the Federation of Drinking Water and Sanitation Users, Nepal, to scale up local government policy advocacy and planning frameworks, while a partnership with the Ministry of Finance led to the establishment of the Public Finance Innovation laboratory.

To enable gender-transformative programming, it is crucial that UNICEF partners with stakeholders who share similar values and commitments to gender equality. UNICEF can also play an important role in building and strengthening the capacity of its partners in gender-transformative programming through targeted training, knowledge-sharing and technical assistance. This will allow for partners to enhance their understanding of gender issues and deeply rooted societal norms that lead to gender inequality, and develop their skills in addressing these gender norms and inequalities to implement, sustain and scale up gender-transformative interventions.

» Investing in feminist movements and girl-and women-led organizations

Partnering with and investing in feminist movements and girl and women-led organizations is an important component of gender-transformative programming. Such investments also help bring to the fore the voices of adolescent girls, especially those from marginalized sections of society, and enable UNICEF and its partners to leverage the strong grassroot networks and connections of these organizations. It also adds unique perspectives, expertise and lived experiences to programming and can lead to sustainable change by engaging feminist movements and women-led organizations in co-creation and implementation of programmes.

The review, particularly data collected from civil society and youth stakeholders, highlighted meaningful partnerships as an area where they would like to see UNICEF programmes and initiatives do more in the region. UNICEF works through partnerships with stakeholders, but has largely prioritized governments and larger organizations over smaller, nimbler and women- and girl-led organizations that may require more institutional support and funding. Even within existing partnerships, decision-making and financial power tend to be concentrated in UNICEF, government or large international NGOs, and do not diffuse to smaller local organizations or to adolescents themselves.

» Partnering with youth-led organizations to amplify voices of adolescent girls in programming

Given its size and scale, UNICEF has the potential to become a central node for collaboration with youth-led organizations. During this study, youth-led organizations expressed a strong interest and need to be more involved with UNICEF work in South Asia. UNICEF's reach and resources can help to amplify the voices of adolescent girls through youth networks and youth-led organizations. Youth-led organizations stated that a challenge to working with UNICEF concerns the structural eligibility requirements that most youth-led organizations are unable to meet due to limited resources. This presents an opportunity for UNICEF to identify organizations with the most potential and impact on the ground and help them build their capacity and structural frameworks to strengthen and scale up their work.

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Shequal, a Nepal-based youth-led organnisation is committed to improving the ecosystem etc...

Gaps in programming for adolescent girls

While UNICEF employs many promising approaches, not all programmes and initiatives are showing the desired impact on improving the circumstances of adolescent girls in South Asia. While many programmes are reaching girls, more could be done to target their specific needs and support them to become agents of change and to challenge restrictive gender norms in their communities.

UNICEF country offices across the region self-reported that they were not specifically working to target adolescent girls or their needs through specific programmes or initiatives beyond general programmes that also benefited adolescent girls, despite the presence of government and civil society initiatives that focus on the unique needs of adolescent girls in every country. Integrating girls' unique needs into the design and implementation of programmes and initiatives is a crucial first step for UNICEF to expand the impact on girls.

Despite UNICEF's strong commitment to adolescent rights and well-being, adolescent girls are not yet the core focus of programming. Rather, current programming is along sectoral lines, addressing education, health, WASH, nutrition and other needs, for larger groups of which adolescent girls are part. Current gaps include:

- Need to engage adolescent girls throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation of programmes.
- Lack of focus on the most marginalized adolescent girls.
- Need to address data and evidence gaps on adolescent girls and related programming.

- Need to employ innovative participatory approaches during programme design and implementation.
- Need to strengthen partnerships with girls, youth and women-led organizations.
- Need to address masculinities and to question power and privilege as part of engaging men and boys.
- Need to move UNICEF programming along the gender continuum, from gender-blind to gender-transformative programming.
- Across the South Asia region, girls with marginalized or socially excluded identities face intersecting discrimination and vulnerabilities that amplify the barriers to their full development. Far too many marginalized girls, many of whom leave education early and then face an ongoing struggle to secure livelihoods, are in abusive situations, with little or no access to services including health, social protection and justice. Yet many remain uncovered by UNICEF and civil society programmes.
- Partners highlighted the need for targeted programmes and advocacy to address the needs of other marginalized groups of girls, such as those in geographically remote areas, experiencing stigmatized or discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity, belonging to linguistic and ethnic minorities, married girls and adolescent parents.
- In addition to concentrating on out-of-school girls as part of the "leave no one behind" initiative, intersectional approaches will enable UNICEF to identify the most marginalized and vulnerable girls in different contexts and develop integrated strategies with amplified impact.

Figure 9: Commonly marginalized identities in South Asia

Girls from poor families facing enhanced vulnerabilities across the life course

Girls in hard-to reach areas like remote rural areas and urban slums

Girls married before their 18th birthday

Out-of-school girls and **girls** not in education, employment, or training

LGBTQI+ adolescents

Girls with disabilities

Girls belonging to socially excluded and vulnerable groups, e.gm, ethnic, caste and religious minorities, indigenous, and nomadic communities

Displaced **girls**, girls in refugee camps, or girls impacted by migration

Source: Reported by UNICEF country staff and civil society partners.

👥 Continuity in programming

Like many development actors, UNICEF struggles with lack of continuity in effective programming, which poses challenges for both sustainability and scalability. Often, programmes with positive outcomes and good models are discontinued when donor funding expires. Changes in leadership can also contribute to disruptions due to gaps between the leaders, absent or inefficient handover processes, changed prioritization or other factors. Some new leaders may be less enthusiastic about addressing gender and reaching out to marginalized groups and so more effort may have to go into making the case for existing programmes. Changes in leadership may be especially challenging in humanitarian or fragile contexts which are more likely to experience high turnover. For instance, an evaluation of the Afghanistan Women's Leadership Initiative found "that there were three different country representatives over five years and three different AWLI programme managers during the same period. The change in leadership adversely affected the efficiency of programme management."[102] Changes in UNICEF country office staff are felt by partners to be a source of uncertainty, resulting in mid-project changes in reporting requirements, priorities or even partners.

> **The appetite to reinvent after every three years rather than scaling up is very dangerous. There are programmes that have good outcomes, are good models, but they don't last their duration because they are made to expire by donors or leaders.**
>
> **– KII, UNICEF staff**

To address this, UNICEF should identify and invest in sustaining and expanding programmes with promising outcomes, and scale promising strategies from individual projects to entire programmes. Partnerships with civil society, particularly women's and girls' organizations, should outlast a single project or programme. By adopting a long-term perspective and investing in and prioritizing scalability, UNICEF can maximize the impact of programming for adolescent girls, ensuring that effective interventions continue to benefit girls beyond the lifespan of individual projects.

> **Our project is very short-term. The contract starts from September and ends in December. If we have a 3–4-year programme it would be better.**
>
> **– KII, UNICEF staff**

A 17-year-old girl received vocational training on how to design bangles. Since 2020 she has earned Rs. 200 to Rs. 250 a day. She will join the 11th class this coming academic year and continue with her bangles design to support her family financially.

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💡 Strategic areas for high impact

This review identified three areas where targeted investments by UNICEF could amplify impact for adolescent girls in the region: **mental health, access to digital spaces** and **girls' leadership**. All three areas were identified as crucial to progress by all stakeholders interviewed in the eight countries. They offer a spectrum of opportunities, from the ability to influence the structure and design of programmes, to the need to reconfigure and address historic inequities.

Mental health is a relatively new area of work for UNICEF and is increasingly prioritized and scaled up. Initial investments in gender-transformative approaches that are embedded in UNICEF's approach to MHPSS could pay dividends, both in reaching adolescent girls and in reducing the need for corrective investments later in the programme cycle.

UNICEF is fully invested in large-scale programmes to increase access to digital spaces, skills and technology for children and adolescents, and has a strong foundation of data, evidence and learning on gendered digital gaps. However it needs to counterbalance its investments with greater focus not only on access gaps but on how gender inequalities are replicated and reinforced in digital spaces.

Maska village Balika Panchayat members at a weekly meeting. Balika Panchayat (children's parliament) is an idea to bring girls 11 – 18 years together to strengthen their voice and leadership, to provide a podium where they can reach the adult duty bearer and change agents to prompt their attention towards issues, which affect children directly or indirectly.

Finally, UNICEF has worked in partnership with civil society organizations and networks for decades but has historically struggled to ensure that grassroots women's and girls' networks have equitable access to UNICEF financing and technical support. In this area, UNICEF could benefit from recent learning about partnerships with girls' organizations and networks to reinvest resources into more equitable practices.

While there is near-universal interest in programmes addressing all three areas from UNICEF, partners, governments, and funders, current and new initiatives need increased attention to ensure that girls' needs are at their centre.

Figure 10: Strategic investment areas

	Mental Health	Access to Digital Spaces	Girls' Leadership
Current situation	New and increasing investment and interest from UNICEF and partners	Established and increasing programming and partnerships	Long-term, embedded practices
Actions needed	Immediate gender analysis and investment in gender-transformative approaches from the ground level	Reconfigure or supplement existing investments to reflect new understandings by UNICEF and its partners of gender and digital access	Internal assessment and analysis of existing gaps and historic challenges, institutional shift towards newer and more equitable practices

Source: Reported by UNICEF country staff and civil society partners.

💡 Conclusion

In its Gender Action Plan (2022–2025), UNICEF has committed to a twin-track approach:

1. **mainstreaming gender by ensuring that girls are included throughout programming;**
2. **delivering specific programmes that intentionally target girls and are tailored to meet their needs.**

Overall, this review found that while UNICEF country offices in the South Asia region have managed to reach adolescent girls via mainstreamed programmes for adolescents in all sectors, there is a long way to go towards meeting the commitments of the global strategy and ensuring girls are prioritized and intentionally targeted. Programmes specifically targeting adolescent girls are less common and are concentrated within specific goals and funding streams, such as the UNICEF-UNFPA Joint Programme to End Child Marriage. Mainstream programmes that reach girls have significant gaps in analysis on the challenges and needs specific to girls. High-level political commitments to girls' development are common, but implementation is stalled by a lack of funding, resources or capacity. This does not mean that there has been no progress for girls in the region: significant improvements in girls' education, nutrition,

health, social protection, child protection, access to WASH and inclusion in humanitarian response programming are observed. In many cases, progress emerges from childhood programmes that aim to improve outcomes for children of all genders, rather than targeted investments to address the needs of adolescent girls.

Yet increased investment in targeted programming of adolescent girls, while necessary, is only a first step. This review found that programmes in the region tend to struggle to fully apply gender-transformative approaches that can address the underlying systemic drivers of gender inequalities and discrimination. There is a growing body of evidence on the potential for gender-transformative programming to improve adolescent well-being.[103] Given the entrenched gender norms that impact adolescent girls in the region, this review has focused on how UNICEF can apply a more intentional gender-transformative approach, both using its existing strategies, actions and programmes, and through additional investments in resources, funding, training and capacity. While UNICEF and partners are adept at applying proven and promising programming strategies, greater progress can be made by integrating strategies that work across levels and elements of a gender-transformative approach.

Recommendations

Programming investments with the greatest impact for adolescent girls

Implement gender-transformative approaches to move from reaching girls to promoting gender equality

- Design and implement more programmes specifically catering to the needs of adolescent girls, including investments into formative research, human centred design, and meaningful participation of girls in programme design and delivery. Engage girls throughout the programme design, delivery and evaluation phases, including consultations to inform programme design and grant-making/selection of partner organizations.

- Continue supporting and scaling up safe space programmes for girls, ensuring that mentors and facilitators have adequate training and support to offer holistic activities for girls, and that the skills and education curricula used are inclusive, accessible and specifically targeted towards changing restrictive gender norms.

- Expand access to evidence-informed comprehensive sexuality education that meets international guidelines and increase the delivery of health services through youth-friendly health facilities, safe space programmes, and youth centres.

- Build comprehensive programme portfolios working across multiple levels of the socio-ecological framework and with multiple elements of a gender-transformative approach, with increased investment in community-based approaches to activate social capital for girls, and in girls' advocates to influence gender norms and power with parents, social mobilizers and religious leaders.

- Engage men and boys not just as allies and protectors but as participants who also benefit from positive masculinities and gender equality. Invest in developing tools and methodologies to move beyond engaging men at a superficial level.

- Work with parents and communities to challenge restrictive gender norms and create an enabling environment that supports girls to have more opportunities.

- Leverage existing relationships with governments and strengthen their capacities to incorporate gender-transformative approaches and foster gender-responsive systems.

- Invest in expanded digital platforms and offerings that are fully accessible to and responsive to girls' needs without replicating restrictive gender norms in the digital space. Ensure digital literacy and skills programmes are specifically targeted towards reducing gender gaps, go beyond basic computing skills for girls, and promote positive and non-violent masculinities for boys.

Identify and reach more marginalized girls including those who are out of school, married and/or living with disabilities

- Understand and map adolescent girls who are not reached by current programming because of intersectionalities impacting on their overall vulnerabilities, such as out-of-school girls, girls with disabilities, rural girls and those from lower castes, those impacted by migration, language, racial, religious, and ethnic minority girls, married adolescents and others, in collaboration with local organizations and community-based networks. Work within existing programming to ensure inclusion of all girls while investing in partners and programming approaches to specifically reach marginalized girls.

- Leverage physical community spaces like adolescent-friendly safe spaces, ALP centres and informal schooling centres to provide opportunities for out-of-school learning and continuing education for girls without access to formal education. Ensure that community education programmes include transferable skills as well as livelihood training with a gender-transformative perspective.

- Foster the direct Inclusion of married adolescent girls in existing programmes. Discussions with NGO partners suggest that while they are reaching married adolescent girls, this is limited to those who are continuing their education even after marriage. Hence, it is imperative to include married adolescent girls who are confined in their homes.

- Ensure existing programmes are inclusive, welcoming and accessible, including through investments into expanded capacity on diversity, equity and inclusion, use of physically accessible spaces, investments in materials that can be used with adolescents with limited literacy or in multiple languages, improved use of UNICEF's reasonable accommodations funds and policies, and

zero-tolerance policies for discrimination and stigma of any kind in UNICEF programmes and activities, among others.

- Employ more strategies to reach rural and geographically remote communities, such as increased partnerships with existing grassroots and local networks; using traditional technologies such as radio and television; advocating for and expanding relationships with the private sector to expand digital, telecoms and internet networks to remote areas; and dedicated funding to translate UNICEF tools and materials into local and less-used languages.

- Strengthen systems to reach and meet the needs of marginalized girls, advocating for increased government financing and allocated budgets for gender programming.

An adolescent girl from the Wangsel Institute for the Deaf, located in the western region of Paro, Bhutan, proposes the establishment of a job centre specifically tailored for the deaf population in their community to generate job opportunities catering to individuals with hearing impairments.

Investments to address institutional gaps and challenges

Expand partnerships for adolescent girls

- Expand partnerships with grassroots, community-based organizations, girl-led networks, and youth organizations.

- Support and fund youth-led and women's organizations to define and implement long-, medium- and short-term agendas and programmes. Employ movement-building approaches to collective funding and to pass-through funds to smaller, girl-led projects and programmes, and invest in mentorship and institutional capacity building for such organizations.

- Provide gender training and apply minimum gender competency standards for partner organizations.

- Facilitate networks and alliances among girls' networks and organizations, women's organizations and with other social movements, from community to international levels, as to enhance their credibility, influence, reach, knowledge and security.

- Advocate for and support the role, participation and leadership of girls, adolescents, youth, and women's advocates in policy dialogue at all decision-making levels and as partners in the design and implementation of initiatives in all action areas.

- Prioritize cross-sectoral collaboration within UNICEF programmes and with implementing and development partners for holistic programming for adolescent girls, and invest in restructuring and integrating existing programmes to cater to the most vulnerable adolescent girls.

- Scale up and expand partnerships with United Nations agencies in developing programmes related to adolescent girls to maximize their impact and reach.

Provide more training, support, and dedicated resources for gender

- Improve training and standards for gender awareness among UNICEF staff, especially in their understanding of gender-transformative programming, address the deeply ingrained societal norms that lead to gender inequalities, and create shared understanding and values of what gender equality means.

- Invest in comprehensive training programmes aimed at gender sensitization, value clarification and gender-transformative programming for all staff in all areas, not only gender focal points.

- Integrate gender and the unique needs of girls into all sectoral plans, with gender focal points involved in all phases of programming design and implementation.

- Support country office gender focal points with dedicated time and resources and high-level institutional commitment to coordination and collaboration on gender equality. Provide incentives for programmes to invest in gender analysis and gender-transformative approaches.

- Prioritize gender analysis and gender-transformative approaches in programming and funding decisions, including in selection of implementing partners.

- Invest in collecting sex-disaggregated data and data on marginalized and excluded adolescent girls to ensure that programmes are reaching girls equitably and inclusively.

Adolescent girls in Nepal play football during break time between classes.

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Annexes

Annex 1 – Research questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What interventions does UNICEF currently have for adolescent girls in the South Asia region?

- How have UNICEF interventions responded to the emerging needs and priorities of adolescent girls?

- Are there adolescent interventions by other stakeholders that are impactful for UNICEF to learn from?

- What are the emerging, unfulfilled needs and concerns of adolescents in the region and how the emerging needs vary by country?

- How have UNICEF interventions for adolescent girls responded to the changes in context? What factors have affected reach of needed interventions to adolescent girls, including the most marginalized?

- To what extent has UNICEF ensured that the needs of adolescents, especially the most marginalized, have been considered in the planning and implementation of its programmes? Is UNICEF doing the right things, based on comparative advantage of UNICEF and based on needs of the most vulnerable adolescents? Which groups of adolescent girls are left behind or not reached by UNICEF Interventions?

- To what extent has UNICEF positioned itself as a strategic partner in adolescent programming in the region? What are UNICEF's comparative strengths – particularly in comparison to other United Nations agencies and development partners – and how can these be harnessed to improve adolescent programming?

Annex 2 – Regional U-Reports

Regional U-Reports from South Asia	Date	Number of respondents
Adolescents and Young People's Access to SRH Information and Youth-Friendly Services	April 2021	15,282
Adolescents' and Young People's development priorities and on being heard by policy makers	March 2022	14,211
Adolescents' and Young People's Perceptions and Experiences of Distance Learning.	June 2022	15,322
Adolescents' and Young People's Mental Health Needs and Coping Mechanisms	November 2022	18,606
How Are Young People Coping During COVID-19	September 2020	16,527
Rising to the Challenge: Youth' Perspective on Climate Change and Education in South Asia	November 2020	25,826
Adolescents' and Young People's Healthy Diets and Physical Activity	September 2020	29,689
Coping Mechanisms of Adolescents and Young People in COVID-19 Times	2022	21,741

Annex 3 – Purpose of data collection with key stakeholder groups

Group	Data Collection Method	Purpose
UNICEF gender focal points	Virtual meetings and sense-making workshop	• Gain insights about UNICEF's current work around adolescent well-being • Understand current country level efforts on adolescent girls programming • Set country priority questions and approve partner and stakeholder interactions • Guide in-country data collection
UNICEF staff	KIIs, FGDs, participatory workshop, and sense-making workshop	• Get insights about key programmes in UNICEF's current work around adolescent well-being • Build understanding about partners who have contributed or are contributing in implementing these programmes
UNICEF implementing partners	KIIs and FGDs	• Identify what works and gaps around adolescent programming in the country • Explore challenges in the current efforts and possible roadmaps and actions needed.
Other NGOs and international NGOs	KIIs and FGDs	• Identifying what's working and gaps around adolescent programming in the country. • Exploring challenges faced in the current efforts, possible roadmaps and actions needed
Other stakeholders	KIIs and FGDs	• Explore the long-term plans of the government on programming and policies for adolescent girls' well-being • Identify the support needed from civil society organizations, United Nations organizations and donors to strengthen these efforts.

Annex 4 – Key informant interviews

Country	Female	Male	Total
Afghanistan	1	1	2
Bangladesh	9	4	13
Bhutan	11	6	17
India	5	2	7
Maldives	9	3	12
Nepal	9	3	12
Pakistan	14	3	17
Sri Lanka	10	6	16
Total	**67**	**27**	**94**

Annex 5 – Focus group discussions

Country	Country	Female	Male	Total
Afghanistan	UNICEF gender focal points (virtual)	4	4	8
Afghanistan	Women-led civil society organizations implementing gender programme (virtual)	4	1	5
Bangladesh	Out-of-school youth from the BRAC skills and livelihoods programme (two groups of youth living with disabilities)	7	5	12
Bhutan	Youth volunteers/advocates from four youth groups	7	0	7
India	Young people from four youth groups	15	6	21
India	Parents, PRI community group members and frontline workers	18	10	28
Nepal	Young people from the Association of Youth Organizations Nepal	4	3	7
Nepal	Volunteer Service Overseas	2	1	3
Nepal	Save the Children	3	0	3
	Total	**69**	**30**	**99**

Annex 6 – Participatory workshops with UNICEF staff

Country	Female	Male	Total
Bangladesh	5	1	6
Bhutan	11	5	16
India	5	4	9
Maldives	4	1	5
Nepal	9	3	12
Pakistan	7	2	9
Total	**41**	**16**	**57**

Annex 7 – Elements of gender-tranformative approaches

Programme Activities	Norms Change	Agency, Skills, and Empowerment			Engaging Men and Boys	Community Engagement	Systems and Services			
		Agency	Skills	Empowerment			Health	Education	Child Protection	Social Protection
Safe Spaces	• Ichedana (Bangladesh) • Rupantaran (Nepal) • Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal) • Parivartan for Girls* (India) • It's My Body* (India)		• Improving Adolescent Lives in Afghanistan (Afghanistan) • Kishoree Kontha (Bangladesh) • PI-Tops (Bhutan) • Rupantaran (Nepal) • Paankh* (India) • Sahar* (Afghanistan)	• Rupantaran (Nepal), • Healthy Transitions for Nepali Youth (Nepal) (*), • Afghan Women's Leadership Initiative (Afghanistan), • Udaan (India)	• Improving Adolescent Lives in Afghanistan (Afghanistan) • Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal) • Udaan (India) • Yuwaah (India) • Parivartan* (India)	• Udaan (India)	• Udaan (India)	• Women's and Girls' Safe Spaces (Afghanistan) • Sahar* (Afghanistan) • Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) (India)	• Improving Adolescent Lives in Afghanistan (Afghanistan) • Kishor-kishori Clubs (Bangladesh) • Meena Manch (India)	• Rupantaran (Nepal)
Cash Transfer/ Cash +								• Kishoree Kontha (Bangladesh)	• Child Family Tracker (Nepal)	• Afghan Women's Leadership Initiative (Afghanistan)
Media/Public Education	• Healthy Transitions for Nepali Youth* (Nepal) • Adolescent Empowerment Programme (India) • Meena Programme (Bangladesh)		• Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal)	• Improving Adolescent Lives in Afghanistan (Afghanistan) • MyDadMyAlly Campaign* (India)	• Equal Partner Campaign (Sri Lanka) (*)	• Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage (GPECM) (Bangladesh) • Youth Voice in Youth Matters (Bhutan)	• OnMyMind (Bangladesh) • Communication to change perceptions of mental health issues (Maldives) • Red Dot Campaign (Bhutan)	• Alternative Learning Pathways (Bangladesh, Pakistan)	• Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (Pakistan) • Yuwaah (India)	
Community Engagement										
• intergenerational dialogue	• Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (Pakistan) • Girls Power Project* (Pakistan) • Adolescent Empowerment Programme (India) Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal)			• Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal) • It's My Body* (India)	• Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal)	• Challenging harmful norms through intergenerational dialogue	(Pakistan)			
• community dialogue	• Afghan Women's Leadership Initiative (Afghanistan) • Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (Pakistan)				• Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (Pakistan)	• Healthy Transitions for Nepali Youth* (Nepal) • Afghan Women's Leadership Initiative (Afghanistan) • Kishoree Kontha (Bangladesh)	• IBAMA (Maldives)	• IBAMA (Maldives)	• Improving Adolescent Lives in Afghanistan (Afghanistan)	• IBAMA (Maldives)
• mapping/ rosters										• Girl Roster* (Bangladesh, India) • Afghan Women's Leadership Initiative (Afghanistan) • Child Family Tracker (Nepal)

Programme Activities	Norms Change	Agency, Skills, and Empowerment			Engaging Men and Boys	Community Engagement	Systems and Services			
		Agency	Skills	Empowerment			Health	Education	Child Protection	Social Protection
• community influencers			• Keep Girls in School (Bangladesh)			• Adolescent Empowerment Programme (India) • Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (Pakistan) • Improving Adolescent Lives in Afghanistan (Afghanistan) • Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal)		• Keep Girls in School (Bangladesh) • Udaan (India)		
Positive Parenting	• Udaan (India) • Communication to change perceptions of mental health issues (Maldives) • Adolescent Empowerment Programme (India) • Improving Adolescent Lives in Afghanistan • Rupantaran Adult Package (Nepal)		• Child Online Safety Programme (Bangladesh) • Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal)	• Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (Pakistan) • Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal)		• Parent Super Power (Sri Lanka) • Rupantaran (Nepal) • It's My Body* (India)	• Parent Super Power (Sri Lanka)		• Improving Adolescent Lives in Afghanistan (Afghanistan) • IBAMA (Maldives)	• Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal)
Skills Development										
• community-based education	• Ichedana (Bangladesh)		• Sahar* (Afghanistan) • Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (Pakistan) • UPSHIFT/ IMAGEN (Maldives) • Accelerating Protection for Children (Bangladesh) • Alternative Learning Pathways (Pangladesh, Pakistan)	• Adolescent Empowerment Programme (India) • Girls' Access to Education (GATE) (Nepal)		• Sahar* (Afghanistan)		• Supporting girls' education through cash transfers (Afghanistan) • BALIKA (Bangladesh), • Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (Pakistan) • Yuwaah (India) • Let Us Learn (Bangladesh) • Myanmar Curriculum Project (Bangladesh) • Alternative Learning Pathways and Accelerated Education Programme (Pakistan)		
• digital skills	• OnMyMind (Bangladesh)	• Yuwaah (India)	• Skills4Girls (Bangladesh, India, Nepal) • Yuwaah (India) • Generation Unlimited (Bangladesh) • Child Online Safety Programme (Bangladesh) • Digital Literacy Programme (India), • PI Tops (Bhutan), • Womentors (Maldives) • Sahar* (Afghanistan)			• Child Online Safety Programme (Bangladesh)	• Adolescent Health Site and App (Bangladesh) • Menstrual Health App (Nepal)	• Yuwaah (India), • Skills4Girls (Bangladesh, India, Nepal) • PI Tops (Bhutan)	• Child Online Safety Programme (Bangladesh)	• Yuwaah (India)

Programme Activities	Norms Change	Agency, Skills, and Empowerment			Engaging Men and Boys	Community Engagement	Systems and Services			
		Agency	Skills	Empowerment			Health	Education	Child Protection	Social Protection
• livelihoods/ financial literacy			• BALIKA (Bangladesh • Yuwaah (India) • UPSHIFT (Bhutan) • Afghan Women's Leadership Initiative (Afghanistan) • Kishoree Kontha (Bangladesh) • UPSHIFT/IMAGEN (Maldives) • Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal) • Skills4Girls (Bangladesh, India, Nepal) • Innovate Bhutan (Bhutan) • Plan-It Girls* (India) • Rupantaran (Nepal)	• BALIKA (Bangladesh) • Plan-It Girls* (India) • SELF Academy by CREA* (India)				• BALIKA (Bangladesh)		• Yuwaah (India)
Frontline Capacity Strengthening										
• worker training/ guidance				• Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (Pakistan)	• Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage (GPECM) (India)		• Adolescent Friendly Health Services (AFHS) (Bangladesh), • Healthy Transitions for Nepali Youth* (Nepal) • Adolescent Empowerment Programme (India) • Communication to change perceptions of mental health issues (Maldives)	• Adolescent Empowerment Programme (India) • Quality learning and positive aspirations through non-formal education (Nepal) • Skills and competency-based secondary education curriculum (Bangladesh) • Bhutan Professional Standards for Teachers/ New Normal Curriculum (Bhutan) • Inclusive and Special Education Programme (Bhutan)	• Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (Pakistan)	• Kishoree Kontha (Bangladesh)
• home visits	• Healthy Transitions for Nepali Youth* (Nepal)	• Prachar (India)								• Culturally acceptable safe spaces for girls (Afghanistan)

Programme Activities	Norms Change	Agency, Skills, and Empowerment			Engaging Men and Boys	Community Engagement	Systems and Services			
		Agency	Skills	Empowerment			Health	Education	Child Protection	Social Protection
Girls' Leadership and Advocacy										
• peer education/ peer groups	• Adolescent Empowerment Programme (India) • Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (Pakistan) • Ichedana (Bangladesh), • Accelerating Protection for Children (Bangladesh) • PI-Tops (Bhutan) • Rupantaran (Nepal) • Community Action Against Chaupadi by Restless Development (Nepal)		• Afghan Women's Leadership Initiative (Afghanistan) • Kishoree Kontha (Bangladesh) • Ostad-Shagird* (Bangladesh) • STEM project by Mercy Corps* (Nepal) • Know Your Body, Know Your Rights* (India)	• Rupantaran (Nepal) • Healthy Transitions for Nepali Youth* (Nepal) • Adolescent Empowerment Programme (India) • BALIKA (Bangladesh) • Improving Adolescent Lives in Afghanistan (Afghanistan)	• Healthy Transitions for Nepali Youth* (Nepal) • Adolescent Empowerment Programme (India)	• Youth Voice in Youth Matters (Bhutan) • Community Action Against Chaupadi by Restless Development (Nepal)	• Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (Bhutan)	• Improving Adolescent Lives in Afghanistan (Afghanistan) • Yuwaah (India)	• Rupantaran (Nepal)	• Community Action Against Chaupadi by Restless Development (Nepal)
• mentors/ role models	Healthy Transitions for Nepali Youth (Nepal) (*) Parivartan for Girls by ICRW (India)*	Young Girls Circle (Bhutan)	• Improving Adolescent Lives in Afghanistan (Afghanistan)	• BALIKA (Bangladesh) • Rupantaran (Nepal) It's My Body* (India)	• MyDadMyAlly Campaign* (India)					
• policy advocacy			• Yuwaah (India) • Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal) • Youth Voice in Youth Matters (Bhutan)	• Know Your Body, Know Your Rights* (India)		• Improving Adolescent Lives in Afghanistan (Afghanistan) • Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal)	• Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (Bhutan) • Adolescent Nutrition Strategy (Pakistan) • National Mental Health Communications Strategy and Campaign (Maldives) • Subsidized menstrual health and hygiene supplies (Nepal)	• Education Watch Group (Nepal) • Know Your Body, Know Your Rights* (India)	• Child Online Safety Programme (Bangladesh) • CCDDR (Sri Lanka)	• Adolescent Empowerment Programme (India) • Tipping Point* (Bangladesh, Nepal)

* Programmes without UNICEF involvement.

WHAT WORKS FOR GIRLS IN SOUTH ASIA:
A SITUATION ANALYSIS

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for every child

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