



10 How our future depends on a girl at this **decisive age**



## The State of World Population 2016

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# state of world population 2016

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# FOREWORD



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## When a girl reaches age 10, her world changes.

A flurry of life-changing events pulls her in many directions. Where she ends up depends on the support she receives and the power she has to shape her own future.

In some parts of the world, a 10-year-old girl, on the verge of adolescence, sees limitless possibilities ahead and begins making choices that will influence her education and, later, her work and her life.

But in other parts of the world, a 10-year-old girl's horizons are limited. As she reaches puberty, a formidable combination of relatives, figures in her community, social and cultural norms, institutions and discriminatory laws block her path forward.

By age 10, she may be forced to marry. She may be pulled out of school to begin a lifetime of childbearing and servitude to her husband.

At 10, she may become property, a commodity that can be bought and sold.

*"In many ways, a 10-year-old girl's life trajectory will be the true test of whether the 2030 Agenda is a success—or failure."*

At 10, she may be denied any say in decisions about her life.

At 10, her future is no longer hers. It is determined by others.

Impeding a girl's safe, healthy path through adolescence to a productive and autonomous adulthood is a violation of her rights. But it also takes a toll on her community and nation.

Whenever a girl's potential goes unrealized, we all lose.

Conversely, when a girl is able to exercise her rights, stay healthy, complete her education and make decisions about her own life, she—and everyone around her—wins. She will be healthier and, if she later chooses to start a family, her children will be healthier. She will be more productive and make a better living and in turn make the world a better place.

The new United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its accompanying 17 Sustainable Development Goals aim for equitable, inclusive development that leaves no one behind. This 15-year plan promises to help transform the futures of millions of 10-year-old girls who have traditionally been left behind.

At the same time, many of the Sustainable Development Goals may only be achieved if everyone's potential—including that of all 10-year-old girls—is realized. Chief among the Goals is a vision for a world without poverty. But how much progress can we expect if the enormous potential of girls remains stifled and squandered?

In many ways, a 10-year-old girl's life trajectory will be the true test of whether the 2030 Agenda is a success—or failure.

With support from family, community and nation, and the full realization of her rights, a 10-year-old girl can thrive and help bring about the future we all want.

What the world will look like in 15 years will depend on our doing everything in our power to ignite the potential of a 10-year-old girl today.

**Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin**

United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director  
UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund

A young girl with dark hair, wearing a purple and green striped shirt, is looking towards the camera. The background is a soft, out-of-focus outdoor setting. The text is overlaid on a dark grey rectangular area.

# 1

CHAPTER

# THE FACE OF THE FUTURE

**She is 10 years old.** Still a child, her face fresh, but lit with curiosity as she instinctively turns towards adulthood. Equipped to rapidly absorb wisdom and knowledge from those around her, she is poised to one day become an inspiring leader, a productive worker, an innovator, a caring parent or any of the other roles that power a thriving, dynamic society. She will shape the future of her community and our shared world.

Photo: © UNFPA/Live Images



But will that future be for better—or for worse? Many dangers lie ahead. At 10, a girl arrives at a vulnerable point in her life. She must negotiate a tricky transition to being an adult, with its rapid changes in body and brain, and dramatic shifts in family and social expectations. Although risks abound for both girls and boys, gender discrimination makes these worse for girls in almost every way. Public policies focused on very young children or older adolescents, and limited in their responsiveness to gender discrepancies, do not adequately manage these risks (Population Council, 2016a). Social norms and practices may make them more severe.

As a result, millions of 10-year-old girls end up with poor protection of their rights and well-being. Too many become labourers, primary performers of household chores, wives or sex-trafficked commodities. Childhood ends with limited education or opportunities, with violence or ill-health, with no say in decisions.

At 10, a girl is approaching puberty, when many people start to think of her as an asset—for work, childbearing or sex (Bruce, 2006, 2009). If her rights are not well protected, through appropriate laws, services and investments, the chance to bloom in adolescence and become a fully fledged adult forever slips away. Her prospects may be particularly grim if she lives in a poor country or community, or in a village instead of a city.

The world has already done well in many ways

## Picture a new world for the 10-year-old girl

Picture the 10-year-old girl in a world that truly values, nurtures and protects her. This is the age when her options, instead of contracting, expand and diversify. People have agreed that her human rights in their entirety must be upheld, just as they are for her brother, and this is reflected in laws and legal practice as well as social norms. No one thinks that a girl is ready for marriage or childbearing until she is at least 18. No one expects her to abandon school for paid work or household chores.

She goes to a good school that is clean, safe and not too far from her house. Male and female teachers encourage girls to raise their hands to answer questions as often as boys. Textbooks tell stories of leaders and historical figures who are men and women. If the girl is a whiz in science or math, no one suggests that she study anything more “feminine.” She begins to acquire new skills to manage her life—how to sustain positive relationships, comprehensively understand sexuality and reproduction, develop financial literacy, and avoid risks to her physical and mental well-being.

This 10-year-old girl has enough food, and it is the right food to nourish her growing body and developing brain. She does not suffer from either malnutrition or obesity. When she needs health care, services will be nearby, and she finds caregivers trained to listen carefully. They respect her extra needs for privacy, safeguard against emerging

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