

# A New Era for Girls

Taking stock of  
25 years of progress

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for every child

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# Contents

4

Taking stock

---

5

Foreword

---

6

Reflecting on a quarter century of progress

---

10

Education empowers girls for life and work

---

18

Gender-based violence and harmful practices violate girls' rights

---

26

Girls face heightened health risks in adolescence

---

36

Prioritizing actions with girls

---

38

Endnotes



## Taking stock

Nearly 64 million girls were born in 1995, the year the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted, beginning their lives as the global community committed to improving their rights. In 2020, nearly 68 million girls are expected to be born. The analysis presented in this report shows that while girls' lives are better today than they were 25 years ago, these gains are uneven across regions and countries. This is particularly true for adolescent girls.

To accelerate progress, girls need to be involved in both the decision-making and designing of solutions that impact their future. This report demonstrates the need to focus on the realities girls face today and addresses the critical issues of ending gender-based violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM); making sure girls have access to 12 years of

education and the skills they need for the workforce; and improving girls' health and nutrition. This analysis is not intended to be an exhaustive assessment of girls' rights and well-being, but rather a review of progress for girls in key dimensions of their lives. It draws upon internationally comparable time series data to assess advancements against the strategic objectives for girls set out in the Beijing Platform for Action 25 years ago. Where a lack of data prevents trend analysis, the current situation of girls is highlighted.

The evidence provides a foundation for recommendations to global, national and regional stakeholders on important actions that would enable girls to successfully transition into adulthood with the ability to make their own choices and with the social and personal assets to live a fulfilled life.

# Foreword

Today's more than 1.1 billion girls are poised to take on the future. Every day, girls are breaking boundaries and barriers to lead and foster a safer, healthier and more prosperous world for all. They are tackling issues like child marriage, education inequality, violence, climate justice, and inequitable access to healthcare. Girls are proving they are unstoppable.

Back in 1995, the world adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – the most comprehensive policy agenda for gender equality – with the vision of ending discrimination against women and girls. But today, 25 years later, discrimination and limiting stereotypes remain rife. Girls' life expectancy has extended by eight years, yet for many the quality of that life is still far from what was envisioned. Girls have the right to expect more. The realities they face today, in contexts of technological change and humanitarian emergencies, are both remarkably different from 1995 and more of the same: with violence, institutionalized biases, poor learning and life opportunities, and multiple inequalities unresolved. There are major breakthroughs still to be made.

There are many success stories: Fewer girls are getting married or becoming mothers, and more are

in school and literate – acquiring key foundational skills for lifelong success. But progress has been uneven and far from equitable. Girls from the poorest households or living in fragile or humanitarian settings are not benefiting from the expansion in education, while the girls who are in school are struggling to secure the quality education they need to compete in a rapidly changing workforce, where digital and transferable skills, like critical thinking and confidence, are indispensable.

Today, no matter where a girl lives, she is risk of encountering violence in every space – in the classroom, home and community. And the types of violence she will come into contact with have become increasingly complex with the rise of technology. However, technology has also opened up opportunities for girls to grow their networks and learn digital and transferable skills that will prepare them for life and work.

To have an education and a future, girls must also be healthy. Yet, when it comes to making decisions about their health and well-being, girls still face significant barriers to accessing and benefiting from health services to meet their specific needs, such as those related to sexual and reproductive health – due to cost,

stigma, limited age-appropriate information, fear of side effects or limited decision-making autonomy. In 2020, a gender-equitable world is still a long way off. The next steps for change must meaningfully include girls as decision-makers and designers of the solutions to the challenges and opportunities they face every day.

Girls are rights holders and equal partners in the fight for gender equality. They represent a tremendous engine for transformational change towards gender equality. They deserve the full support of the global community to be empowered to successfully transition to adulthood with their rights intact, able to make their own informed choices and with the social and personal assets acquired to live fulfilled lives.

We know the best advocates for girls are girls. Every girl is a powerful agent of change in her own right. And, when girls come together to demand action, shape policies, and hold governments to account, we can together change our schools, families, communities and nations for the better. As leaders, it's our duty to bridge the generations, working with and for today's girls to raise their voices and achieve their dreams.

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## Reflecting on a quarter century of progress

The world is home to more than 1.1 billion girls under age 18, who are poised to become the largest generation of female leaders, entrepreneurs and change-makers the world has ever seen. Girls are living longer lives than they were 25 years ago, when nations committed to advancing gender equality as part of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Girls born today can expect to live nearly eight more years, on average, than girls born in 1995.<sup>1</sup>

That's eight more years to live out their dreams, to participate in decisions that affect their lives, and to lead positive change in society. Yet, girls continue to face enormous hurdles in a world that still largely favours boys and men. Girls are still excluded from decision-making that impacts their lives, and the most marginalized girls – those from ethnic minorities, indigenous groups and poor households; living in rural or conflict settings; and living with disabilities – face additional layers of discrimination.

Discrimination and harmful gender norms starting at birth (and in some places before birth through female foeticide) set limits on what behaviours or opportunities are considered appropriate for girls. These beliefs are often entrenched in laws and policies that fail to uphold girls' rights, such as rights to inheritance. At least 60 per cent of countries still discriminate against daughters' rights to inherit land and non-land assets in either law or practice.<sup>2</sup>



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*I am glad to be a girl because when girls are given the chance, we will fight for our rights and pass on what we have learned to other girls who are facing the same situations.”*

**Zaharah, age 16,  
from Uganda**



Gender discrimination not only restricts girls' abilities to accumulate human, social and productive assets, limiting their future educational and employment opportunities, but also hinders their well-being and diminishes their self-belief. As a result, by the time girls reach adolescence, many are left dreaming instead of achieving.

When it comes to education today, fewer girls are out of school. Nearly two in three girls are enrolled in secondary school compared to one in two in 1998. However, we are facing a globally recognized “learning crisis”; this means, even when girls are in school, many do not receive a quality education. Many are not developing the transferable skills, like critical thinking and communication, or digital

skills needed to compete in today's labour market and gig economy. In fact, worldwide, nearly one in four girls aged 15–19 years is neither employed nor in education or training compared to 1 in 10 boys of the same age.

The risk of violence in every space – online and in the classroom, home and community – similarly keeps girls from achieving. Thirteen million girls aged 15–19 years have experienced forced sex in their lifetimes. Meanwhile, even though harmful practices such as child marriage and FGM have declined in the past 25 years, they continue to disrupt and damage the lives and potential of millions of girls globally.

Further, conflict and displacement only heighten the risk and realities

of gender-based violence. As girls lose their support systems and homes, and are placed in insecure environments and in new roles, their risk of gender-based violence, including sexual violence, intimate partner violence, child marriage and abuse, increases.

While fewer adolescent girls are becoming mothers today, they still face a high risk of sexually-transmitted infections and anaemia – risks that increase when they struggle to access age-appropriate health services and information. This is nowhere more obvious than in the case of HIV, where adolescent girls continue to bear the brunt of the virus's effects. Globally, 970,000 adolescent girls aged 10–19 years are living with HIV today, compared to 740,000 in 1995.

## Girls are a unique group requiring focused commitments



*There is no definition of what it means to be a girl. What a man can do, a woman can do, too. I believe life would be better if we didn't have those stereotypes."*

**Lan\*, Grade 10, Viet Nam**

*\*name changed to protect identity*

The global community has good cause to celebrate the progress achieved over the last quarter century in the name of girls' rights. But we cannot lose sight of the challenges girls still face every day.

Twenty-five years ago, the Beijing Platform for Action recognized that childhood is a separate space from adulthood. Girls' needs, preferences and vulnerabilities are related to women's, but are also distinct. The Platform called upon governments, donors and civil society to invest in ending discrimination against girls and eliminating barriers in health, nutrition, education and related domains that prevent them from realizing their full potential. It also called upon governments to ensure that all data is disaggregated and analysed by sex and age so governments can formulate policies and programmes, and make decisions that better protect and support girls in achieving brighter futures.

Adopted in 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development renews the commitment to creating a world where all girls are healthy and protected, learn and have a fair chance to succeed. But, commitment has not led to direct investments: Only a

Likewise, programmes and interventions to support adolescent girls are often disjointed, and they fall through the gaps in approaches only targeted at either children or women. For example, efforts to end child marriage are often disconnected from efforts to support school retention or secure sexual and reproductive health. Adolescent girls' challenges and the solutions to them must be addressed holistically, as success in each area pushes progress in another.

*For progress to be achieved, girls' voices and solutions must take centre stage, and the global community, including governments, civil society organizations, multilaterals, statisticians and the private sector must work with girls to take actions that set them up to succeed.*

Empowering girls will require the global community to:

- Expand opportunities for girls to be the changemakers, actively engaging their voices and opinions in their communities and political processes about any decision that relates to their bodies

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