



**REALISING
EVERY GIRL'S
RIGHT TO
FLOURISH:**

**A REVIEW OF PROGRESS
ON THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE INTERNATIONAL
DAY OF THE GIRL**

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Bakul, 17, dropped out of school early and now helps her family make cane mats (Bangladesh).

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Design: Out of the Blue



INTRODUCTION

Under international law, all girls throughout the world enjoy a variety of rights that entitle them not only to survive but to develop to their full potential on equal terms with others. The rights are contained in an array of global and regional treaties, all of which require countries to respect, protect and promote them – and if all girls are indeed to flourish, it is essential that these commitments are honoured with wholehearted resolve.

Concerned by slow progress in this regard, the girls' rights movement engaged in advocacy that led to the United Nations' (UN) designation of 11 October as the International Day of the Girl (IDG). The IDG was first observed in 2012 and has continued since then to be an occasion for giving visibility to girls and reminding the global community of its duty to realise their rights through stronger leadership, stronger policies and laws, and stronger, better-resourced implementation of these policies and laws.

In 2022, we observe the 10th IDG, which is an opportune moment to take stock of the journey so far towards achieving lasting change and gender equality for girls.

THIS REPORT PROVIDES A REVIEW OF WORLDWIDE PROGRESS BETWEEN 2012 AND 2022 IN ADVANCING THE RIGHTS OF ALL GIRLS TO DEVELOP TO THEIR FULL POTENTIAL AS THE CHILDREN OF TODAY AND ADULTS OF TOMORROW.

An 18-year-old says she sometimes thinks about running away from home (Kenya).
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It shows that, on the one hand, there is much to celebrate on the 10th IDG; on the other, it draws attention to persistent patterns of inequality and exclusion and the factors contributing to them.

INTRODUCTION

This was a period in which efforts to move forward on girls' rights were hampered by global issues such as COVID-19, economic shocks, humanitarian crises, conservative backlash, and worsening climate change.

The review thus highlights the need for renewed global commitment to increased investment not only in girls' rights generally, but in measures that go beyond giving legal recognition to these rights

and create conditions that enable all girls, especially the most vulnerable, to exercise them fearlessly.

As the review's stark conclusions suggest, the 10th anniversary of the IDG is both a celebration and a crossroads for the global community: a point from which to look backward to the past and, equipped with its lessons, look forward to the future, consider different pathways – and then decide and act.

INSIGHTS FROM THE *REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES* STUDY

Decisions made at the UN, by national politicians, by traditional and religious leaders, parents and boys affect the ability of girls to make their own choices and affect their lives. Decision-making affects girls' real choices and real lives. They have a right to be part of the making of those decisions to ensure they are free to make their own choices and determine their own life journey.

Plan International's *Real Choices, Real Lives* is a longitudinal, qualitative study that has followed the lives of 118 girls living in nine countries around the world from their births (in 2006), until they turn 18 (in 2024).^{*} Some of their stories are shared throughout this report to show how global changes in statistics, laws and budgets reviewed in this report make a real difference and impact on girls' freedom and choices.

Their experiences of education, participation, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and child marriage tell the real story of the mixed progress mapped out across this report. They provide the clearest argument for the unfinished work to continue in the next decade to improve the many pieces of the system so that we honour the legitimate demand of girls like Ly in Vietnam during 2020:

“GIRLS ARE HUMAN BEINGS, AND THEY HAVE RIGHTS TO CHOOSE THEIR LIFESTYLES OR THEIR WAY OF DOING THINGS. NOBODY CAN FORCE THEM.”



^{*} The nine countries span Africa (Benin, Togo, and Uganda), Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador), and Southeast Asia and the Pacific (Cambodia, the Philippines, and Vietnam). The study data, covers the 10 years since the first International Day of the Girl and explores themes linked to the MDGs and the SDGs.

Note: Names used in the study are pseudonyms.

METHODOLOGY

This report is a rapid literature review of secondary sources published in the past decade. They comprise research reports; treaty-body reports, instruments and frameworks; progress reports; gender-equality reports; sector-specific reports by the United Nations (UN), including by UN Women, UNICEF and UNESCO, as well as similar reports by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and international NGOs; human development and gender index reports; and reports by structures monitoring the implementation of global and regional gender-based commitments.

LIMITATIONS

Making an accurate assessment of changes in various aspects of girls' rights in 2012 compared to 2022 is difficult because there are significant inadequacies in the available data. It is not that there is insufficient data, the challenge is systemic. There is no standard, agreed girls' rights and equality framework or index of indicators to allow measurement over time of progress in achieving goals in rights-realisation or improvement in factors enabling rights-realisation.



An 16-year-old and her mother at their home in Paucartambo province (Peru).

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Many reports in the past decade certainly measure progress in gender equality and outcomes for women and children. However, while some are disaggregated by age and gender, thereby giving insight into progress for girls, most provide a solid picture of change over time only for women and children, not girls. This is because they are structured as indexes of standard women- and child-centred indicators.

There is no comparable composite girls' index built on an agreed framework of goals, outcomes, rights, and systemic enablers; instead, different organisations track different services, rights and outcomes for different girls over different intervals. Ultimately, no agreed indicators exist for measuring girls' development, gender equality, and changes in patterns of exclusion.

In view of these data challenges, it was hard to form a clear, comprehensive and accurate picture of the situation in 2012 and use it as a baseline for comparison with the current situation. Ten years ago, however, the era of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was nearing an end and the world was capturing lessons to shape the agenda for the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This yielded a rich source of information and insight which was incorporated into the review.

INDICES USED IN THE REVIEW

In the absence of a girls' development index, the review drew on a selection of gender-disaggregated indices that measure the development of children and progress in achieving gender equality. Although they are not ideal, given their child- and women-centred framing, they do shed light on improved

outcomes across girls' life course, improvements in gender equality, and shifts in patterns of exclusion. Some also go further and assess systemic factors such as the adoption of laws and the adequacy of programmes and financial resources. The indices are listed below:

-
- 01** UNICEF's **Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (MODA)** measures multidimensional child poverty based on children's enjoyment of selected rights under by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).¹
-
- 02** The **World Bank's Human Capital Index (HCI)** "measures the future productivity of children born today, compared to what it could be if they had benefited from complete education and full health".² The HCI tracks comparative progress in the realisation of developmentally critical rights of girls and boys.
-
- 03** The **Utilization-adjusted Human Capital Indices (UHCI)**s measure the extent to which potential is developed by measuring "the fraction of the working age population that are in types of jobs where they might be better able to use their skills and abilities to increase their productivity".³
-
- 04** The **World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI)** measures progress in girls' and women's participation across four dimensions: economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment.
-
- 05** The **EM2030 SDG Index (SDGI)** monitors 14 of the 17 SDGs through a gendered lens, tracking progress in gender equality since 2015 in 144 countries.⁴
-
- 06** The **Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) rate** measures the proportion of young people (15–24 years) who are socially excluded – that is, not participating in education, employment, or training.⁵ Tracked by the ILO, it is gender-disaggregated and gives insight into how effectively a number of girls' interrelated rights have been realised, in combination, over time, to secure development, improve outcomes, and achieve gender equality in education and economic participation.
-

SETTING THE SCENE

Against a backdrop of decades of child-rights advocacy, the rights of girls – as distinct from the rights of children or women generally – have come to enjoy unprecedented global visibility in the 21st century. This is due to increasingly influential gender-based activism, and the adoption of the SDGs, Goal 5 of which is to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.”

Volumes of research attest to the role empowered girls play in catalysing societal development, while a burgeoning girls’ rights movement argues that securing girls’ well-being and dignity is a valuable end in itself. In the course of these and other conversations, girls, in all their diversity, have been moving from the shadows into the light as a constituency of hitherto unappreciated agency and consequence.

The IDG gives powerful impetus to this ongoing change in the status of girls. Adopted by the UN to focus attention on the need to realise girls’ rights, shift historical patterns of inequality and exclusion, and, in so doing, achieve inclusive national and global development,⁶ the IDG serves as a reminder of work still to be done and a call to action to recognise that:



An 16-year-old is a girl leader in her rural community (Peru).

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“GIRLS HAVE THE RIGHT TO A SAFE, EDUCATED, AND HEALTHY LIFE, NOT ONLY DURING THESE CRITICAL FORMATIVE YEARS, BUT ALSO AS THEY MATURE INTO WOMEN. IF EFFECTIVELY SUPPORTED ... GIRLS HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO CHANGE THE WORLD – BOTH AS THE EMPOWERED GIRLS OF TODAY AND AS TOMORROW’S WORKERS, MOTHERS, ENTREPRENEURS, MENTORS, HOUSEHOLD HEADS, AND POLITICAL LEADERS. AN INVESTMENT IN REALISING THE POWER OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS UPHOLDS THEIR RIGHTS TODAY AND PROMISES A MORE EQUITABLE AND PROSPEROUS FUTURE, ONE IN WHICH HALF OF HUMANITY IS AN EQUAL PARTNER IN SOLVING THE PROBLEMS OF CLIMATE CHANGE, POLITICAL CONFLICT, ECONOMIC GROWTH, DISEASE PREVENTION, AND GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY.”⁷

INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, the international community's slow progress in meeting its commitments to translate girls' rights into reality prompted the introduction of the IDG as a platform for celebrating wins and spotlighting unfinished business. Today, in the year of the 10th IDG, what can we learn from progress since 2012 to realise the rights of all girls to develop to their full potential? In short, so girls can flourish into change-makers and impact subsequent generations of girls.

More specifically, what improvements were there in the realisation of clusters of rights that support the overarching right to flourish? What shifted in the myriad factors that help or hinder the imperative to give those rights practical expression? What, above all, can we learn from 2012–2022, and what recommendations can be made to inform the strategic agenda for the *next* 10 years of the IDG?

Covering 2012–2022, the review sets out to identify and assess changes in the period through the lens of a rights-based transformational approach. Its focus, in other words, is on whether changes in the

observance of rights and in the enablers of rights-implementation have been *transformational*.

Transformational change is change that advances the achievement of lasting long-term improvement in girls' lives as girls and future prospects as adults by ending historical, intergenerational patterns of exclusion, especially among marginalised girls, that are passed down over time, and equalising opportunities for boys and girls as well as for advantaged and disadvantaged girls.

A premise of the review is that for all girls worldwide to realise their right to flourish and to do so on equal terms with others, there has to be not just change but transformational change. Steps taken, and results achieved, are assessed holistically in relation to the objective of transformation: they count as progress if they bring us sufficiently closer to it than we were before. Deficits in progress indicate, and give insight into, what should be done next; gains offer inspiration for addressing it.

Necessarily, progress on girls' rights in 2012–2022 has to be seen in the context of major global trends in this period, several of which had direct or indirect impacts on these rights:

COVID-19 and its associated lockdown measures, school closures, re-prioritisation of services, loss of livelihood, which affected girls and women more severely than boys and men.⁸

Economic recession and fiscal austerities have seen resources shift away from services critical for realising girls' rights.⁹

Armed conflicts, such as in Ethiopia, Central Sahel, and Ukraine, have disrupted access to services, forced large-scale migration, and resulted in high levels of violence against girls.

An increase in displacement due to humanitarian crises. More than 1% of the world's population is displaced; of these people, over 40% are children.¹⁰

Climate change and extreme weather events have impacted on girls' protection and economic empowerment and increased the risk of harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU), as deepening poverty forces families to explore it as a coping mechanism in the absence of effective social protection.

An ascendant anti-rights movement is vocal in its opposition to the rights of girls, women and non-binary people. Reactionary politicians mobilised public support around "anti-rights messages and policies",¹¹ leading to a surge of regressive laws curtailing civic, political and sexual and reproductive rights. As a result, there has been roll-back on previous wins in, for instance, the access to safe abortion and the protection of LGBTQTIQ+ children from violence and abuse.

Digital transformation holds enormous potential for accelerating gender equality by improving girls' access to information and opportunities for economic participation, but it also puts them at a heightened risk of intimidation, discrimination and abuse.

In spite of – at times, because of – huge gains in the visibility of girls as empowered rights-holders, trends like these have been detrimental to the overarching right that all girls have to develop to their full potential, because the circumstances they involve jeopardise or transgress one or more of the rights which are a necessary ingredient for creating the possibility of that development to occur.

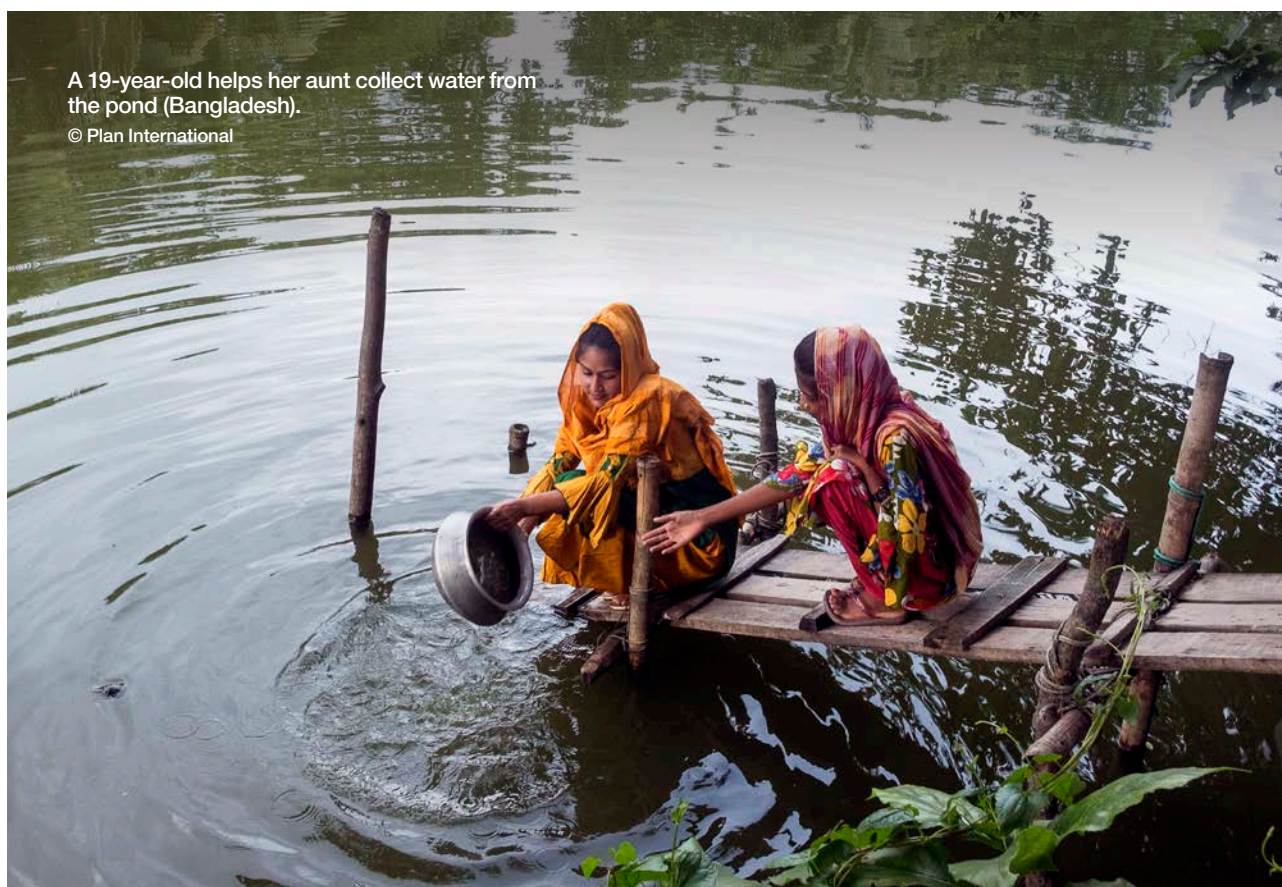
But the keynote trends of 2012–2022 entailed a plethora of other rights transgressions that undermined girls’ capacity to flourish, ranging, for instance, from disrupted education and malnutrition to abuse and trafficking, CEFMU gender discrimination, lack of access to health care, and intimidation into silence.

Significantly, while all children and youth were at risk of these rights transgressions, the risks (and actual incidence of transgression) were not the same for boys and girls, nor even for all girls regardless of context. The distribution of risk reflected familiar patterns of exclusion from rights-enjoyment, with marginalised girls, particularly ones with intersecting vulnerabilities, bearing a disproportionate burden of the fallout – for example, displaced girls, girls in conflict situations, and those in rural areas, in poverty, those who are LGBTQIQ+ and those with disabilities.

Seen in overview, this was a period in which special and emergent challenges interacted with older, longer-standing ones. As a result, gains were off-set by reversals, weaknesses were exposed in how girls’ rights are given effect, and gaps in rights-implementation were aggravated. Little of this helped reduce boy vs girl and better-off vs worse-off disparities in the global village, or prevent arriving ultimately at a picture of brittle, uneven and superficial progress since 2012.

Consequently, while it is widely recognised that advances have been made in realising some rights for some girls, in 2022 many rights are unrealised and many girls, left behind. Realising their rights remains an unfulfilled treaty obligation and key to transformation – to realising girls’ accumulative rights across their life course as girls and into young adulthood and achieving equality for all.

On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the IDG, there is an urgent need for accelerated strategic action to this end. The review goes on to explain the thinking behind its appraisal, and then presents its assessment of improvements in the state of girls’ rights and the levels of action that enable implementation of these rights. After this, it draws its conclusions and makes recommendations with a view to help charting the path for the work that lies ahead globally.



A 19-year-old helps her aunt collect water from the pond (Bangladesh).

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REVIEW FRAMEWORK

THEORY OF CHANGE

The framework of ideas through which this review examines the first ten years of the IDG to ascertain progress on empowering girls to flourish and fulfil their potential is also a framework for looking at how it could be accelerated over the next 10 years and beyond. It rests on a theory of change – of how positive differences could, and should, be made in girls’ lives. This theory of **rights-based transformation** shapes the review.

Its chief idea is that, without exception, all girls in the world should benefit to the fullest extent possible from the rights they have under international treaties and human rights instruments; that no girl should be left behind and not have an equal chance at an equal outcome.

Distilled from the research evidence-base and treaty-related documents, the theory says that for all girls to flourish a number of key ingredients need to be in place to bring about programmes and services that result in successful implementation of a group of **interdependent rights** across every girl’s **life course**. The ingredients function together to produce this outcome and can be seen as forming part of an overall system geared towards it.

Two key concepts to consider are “girls’ interdependent rights” and “an enabling girl-focused rights-based system”.

In order to realise girls’ rights to develop to their full potential, it requires the realisation of **their interdependent rights across their life course**. From birth until they transition into adulthood, girls must enjoy their rights to freedom from discrimination; to health, including sexual and reproductive health; to food and nutrition; to inclusive, quality education; to freedom from violence; and to participate in civic, political and economic life and decision-making. The important point is that, to secure girls’ development, **all of their rights must be realised in combination across their life course**. Realising only some of the rights might improve girls’ survival or protection, but not their development, or, ultimately, gender equality for girls as a population.



A 16-year-old lives in a displacement camp in Burkina Faso.

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In order for there to be an **enabling girl-focused rights-based system**, girls’ rights need to be realised in full, and not in isolation, to achieve meaningful and lasting change to girls’ lives. Crucially, this involves targeting cross-cutting and common causes and drivers to ensure all rights are positively impacted.

- Achieving this requires implementation of effective programmes that provide services which realise rights in the required combinations and address the root causes of transgressions.
- Providing these programmes and services is the responsibility of governments. However, the extent to which this responsibility is fulfilled depends on how effective implementation is.

Effective implementation requires, firstly, robust global leadership and coordination of the girls’ rights agenda. National planning and resourcing shaped by treaty and development instruments, which must make girls’ rights a visible priority and provide guidance on implementation measures.

FIGURE 1 PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S GIRLS PLAN

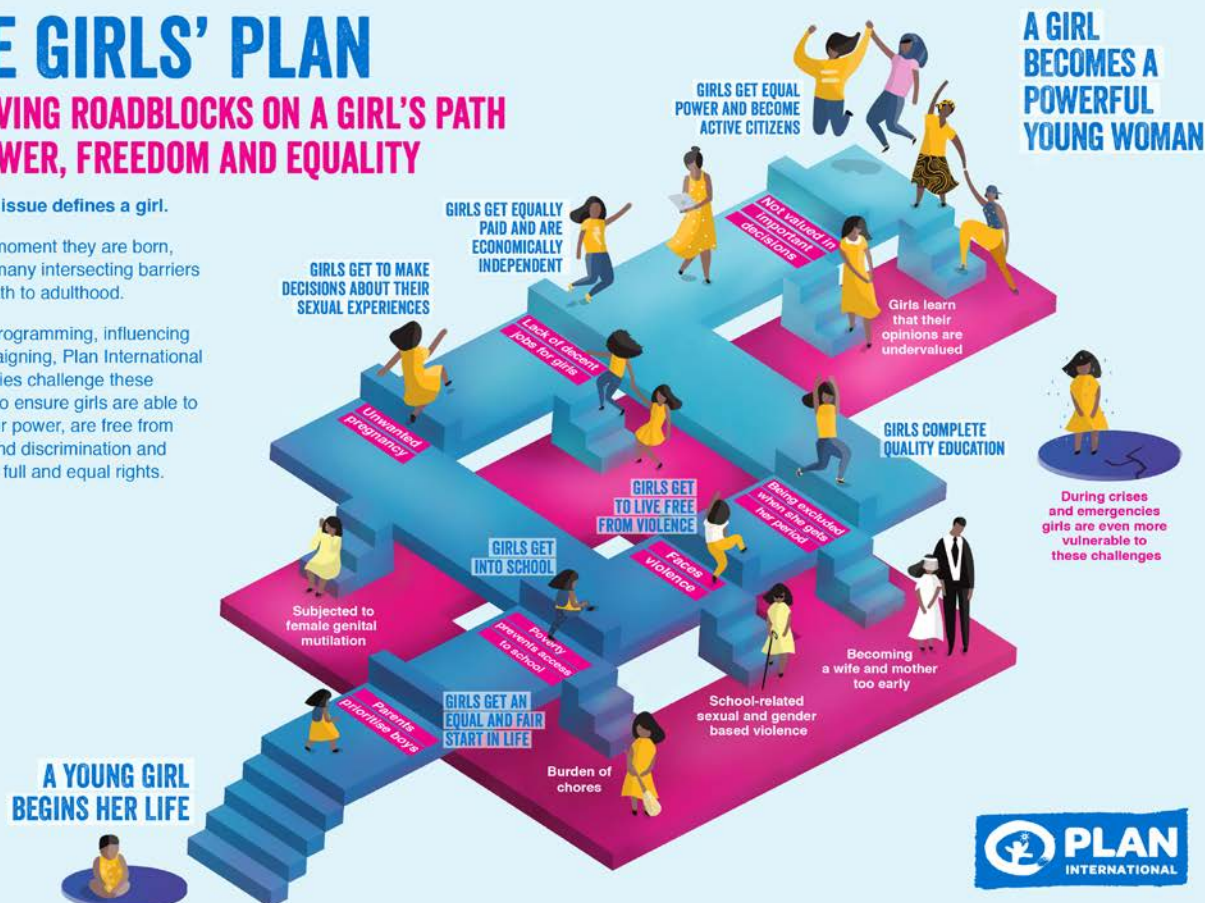
THE GIRLS' PLAN

REMOVING ROADBLOCKS ON A GIRL'S PATH TO POWER, FREEDOM AND EQUALITY

No single issue defines a girl.

From the moment they are born, girls face many intersecting barriers on their path to adulthood.

Through programming, influencing and campaigning, Plan International and our allies challenge these injustices to ensure girls are able to unlock their power, are free from violence and discrimination and enjoy their full and equal rights.



Most countries in the world have ratified key treaties and development instruments (e.g. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that the Geneva Conventions and the SDGs – to name a few), along with supporting frameworks, provide clear statements of the responsibilities governments have in ensuring implementation and achieving the outcomes they promised. These treaties and instruments all provide the same implementation formula. They direct that governments must take all governance and institutional-strengthening measures necessary to ensure state-wide prioritisation and action to recognise, protect, promote and realise children's, girls' and women's rights.

In summary, as depicted in Figure 1, its logic is that realising the right of every girl to flourish requires robust global legal frameworks and leadership that specify clearly defined action by states to realise girls' rights. It requires, too, that these global directives be actioned by governments through institutional arrangements that work together to provide supportive services that address risks, realise girls' interdependent rights, and thereby ensure girls' equal and optimal development.

Girls' rights, gender equality, ending patterns of gendered exclusion, and inclusive development will be achieved only if and when all of the levels of this girl-focused rights-based system are fully realised.

FIGURE 2 THE GIRLS FOCUSED SYSTEM FOR REALISING THEIR RIGHTS TO DEVELOP AND FLOURISH



Children's groups in Vietnam are working together to achieve gender equality.
© Plan International

APPLYING THE THEORY AS A LENS

The review now proceeds to assess progress in 2012–2022 by asking how well this system for realising girls' right to develop functioned during the period. It assesses outcomes for girls to see what progress was made as well as what the regressions, pauses and gaps were. As part of this, it considers systemic factors that were at work in these results by citing selected examples of them; it also highlights some of the relevant challenges. It begins with a snapshot of the situation in 2012, after which it surveys progress in realising the right to develop, drills down into progress on the rights that underlie it, and presents a summary of the overall picture that emerges.

ASSESSING PROGRESS IN GIRLS' RIGHTS

A 17-year-old shows her support for Girls Get Equal (Sierra Leone).

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WHERE DID WE START IN 2012?

As of the first IDG (October 2012), the realisation of some rights for some girls had occurred, but many girls' overall outcomes, gender equality, and patterns of exclusion remained.

Gender parity had been largely achieved in Early Childhood Development (ECD). More girls than ever had access to improved water and sanitation, and were legally protected from CEFMU, unintended and were early pregnancies, and harmful cultural practices. Girls were enrolling in school and were performing better than boys, especially in their earlier years and in certain subjects.

However, the gains made were not transformational:

- The realisation of girls' rights tapered off as they entered adolescence and beyond, and consequently their journey to developing to their full potential stalled. Their early health gains diminished, and they faced an increased risk of violence and abuse, CEFMU, unintended pregnancy, and HIV-infection; this in turn increased the risk of their dropping out from school and remaining excluded from educational, economic, civic and political opportunities due to gender expectations about their domestic roles.
- Long-standing patterns of exclusion had become more deeply entrenched. Girls with multiple risks, such as poverty, disability, and those living in conflict, were largely at the same risk of exclusion as they had been at the start of the MDGs in 2000. Indeed, against a backdrop of growth in the youth population, the end of the MDGs witnessed an exponential increase in the numbers of girls at risk.
- The primary causes of limited progress prior to 2012 included inadequate recognition of girls' rights as a visible priority at global and national levels, and failure to ensure coherent, state-wide responses to deliver services to address girls' needs and intersecting risks at particular stages of development.
- Key risks included poverty, lack of knowledge of girls' rights and caregiver responsibilities, and harmful gender norms, attitudes and practices. Although progressive laws had been passed, these factors limited their implementation. This in turn was because of a failure to follow through with systematic, sustained resourcing and provision of evidence-based programmes to address intersecting risks and the drivers of girls' vulnerabilities.
- Critically, lack of meaningful participation in public processes and decision-making by women and girls was fatal to the shaping, resourcing and monitoring of the girls' rights agenda.

WHAT CHANGED FOR GIRLS BETWEEN 2012-2022?

CHANGES IN THE RIGHT TO DEVELOP TO THEIR FULL POTENTIAL

Were there improvements in girls' development?

It is difficult to answer this question with a simple yes or no due to data challenges. As noted in the Methodology, girls' individual rights have been measured using different indicators at different times, but there has never been a review of whether rights are realised in the combinations needed for girls to flourish. To measure transformation, it is essential to see improvements in longer-term outcomes for girls and in gender equality, not only in specific rights at specific times in their lives.

Progress

At one level, there has been progress over the past decade. The World Bank's HCI measures whether children's potential, including girls', has been developed to its fullest. It does so by measuring their access to a combination of developmentally critical rights, including survival, health and education. The HCI scores suggest that parity was achieved in girls' and boys' development between 2010 and 2020 and that this parity was maintained throughout the decade.¹²

However, while there has been progress for boys and girls, neither are close to realising their full potential. The average across 174 countries is 0.56. This means that children – boys and girls – are not flourishing. They are developing to just over half of their full potential. Globally, girls are actually doing better than boys, based on HCI scores. Globally, girls are actually doing better, based on HCI scores. These are slightly higher for girls (0.59) than for boys (0.56).¹³

The last decade has seen the development potential of both boys and girls improve, resulting in an increase of 2.6 points in the HCI.¹⁴ In 2020, the gender ratio improved further and continues to favour girls. Of the seven countries that had lower HCI scores for girls in 2010, three moved closer to achieving parity – Cameroon, Chad and Côte d'Ivoire. While in Benin, HCI scores were equal between girls and boys, and in Burkina Faso and Morocco, girls' HCI score was higher than boys.¹⁵



A 17-year-old is a youth club member at her school (Rwanda).

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The reason for the improvements is better access to services and rights-realisation for boys and girls.¹⁶ UNICEF notes that the last decade saw progress in, and parity for, girls' and boys' access to services necessary to realise key rights such as those to water and sanitation, education and health care.¹⁷

Regressions, pauses, gaps

Although the HCI scores indicate that there is parity in girls' and boys' development, on closer inspection it becomes clear that the overall score is driven by improvements in the early years of girls' lives rather than across their whole life course.

Girls' development and equality of outcomes have improved in their early years, but as they enter adolescence, progress declines and, as they get older, the gender gap steadily widens. The size of the gap is greater for marginalised girls.¹⁸

The UN Economic Commission notes that gender disparities in the first decade of life are small, especially in the earliest years. Girls and boys and their caregivers, on average, have equal access to services such as birth registration, nutritional support and essential health services to prevent morbidity and mortality, and at ages 3-4, girls and boys are developmentally equally on track. Likewise, gender parity has been largely achieved in primary school enrolment and learning outcomes.

But as girls enter adolescence and early adulthood, gender disparities in access to services and outcomes progressively widen. This shift coincides with the onset of puberty and commencement of the adolescent years (10–19) when “boys' and girls' attitudes about gender develop and gender norms consolidate”, when there is a tendency to

constrain girls' movement, schooling, friendships, and life exposure, and an increase in their domestic responsibilities due to gendered social norms.¹⁹

Persisting inequalities for vulnerable girls

While there have been improvements in the development of girls' potential, especially in earlier years, outcomes for historically marginalised girls have remained unequal and poorer across all life stages.

In 2020, in 13 countries, boys still have a higher HCI score than girls. Of these, eight are in sub-Saharan Africa, two in South Asia, one in the East Asia and Pacific region, one in Latin America and the Caribbean, and one in the Middle East and North Africa. Most (seven) are low-income countries, five are lower-middle-income, and one is an upper-middle-income country.²⁰

Inequities in development outcomes start early for affected girls. For example, whilst, on average, parity has been achieved in child mortality and expected years of schooling, this is not the case in all regions and countries. For example, in India and Tonga child survival rates are higher for boys than girls and girls are more likely to be stunted than boys in Bhutan, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Moldova, and Tunisia.²¹



Girls at their home in Chiang Mai province (Thailand).

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CASE STUDY: HOW GIRLS, PLAN INTERNATIONAL AND ALLIES FOUGHT TO BAN CHILD MARRIAGE IN DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Not many years ago, child marriage wasn't a problem in Dominican Republic, it was a normalised practice for generations. Donors didn't want to fund work on it. The government didn't see the need to act. The general public didn't think it was something that affected the country.

However, married girls were dropping out of school, many of them were already mothers or living with older men.

It was time to make child marriage a national problem. But how could we make the whole country understand the problem and stand up against it?

Alongside young activists, we agreed a bold ambition: "no girl under 18 years old should be married or pregnant in Dominican Republic by 2030". This was just the beginning of action that successfully led to the ban.

What did the action involve?

- **Understanding the magnitude of the child-marriage problem**

We decided to carry out research showing the magnitude of the problem, to change perceptions of child marriage in the country. We aimed to understand the scale of the problem of forced child marriage and its impact on girls by speaking to communities and girls themselves, looking not solely at child and early forced marriage but also at interrelating issues such as early pregnancy, sex work, violence and masculinities.

- **Tactics to mobilise a whole country**

It wasn't just powerful research and data that allowed us to mobilise a whole country, but also the communication strategy to highlight the issue of child marriage.

We linked with likeminded organisations to start a movement and also connected with the Women's Movement who amplified our messages and supported youth organisations. We identified potential supporters in congress and lobbied actively – getting the issue of modifying marriage law to congress twice but never through to senators.

We needed to ensure that the general public would start "feeling" the issue was a problem and stand up against it.

We ran nationwide campaigns with powerful messages that would really challenge people's thinking. Over two years, we made the issue such a part of the general conversation that donors such as the European Union and USAID started to fund our work.

Leveraging the International Day of the Girl

A new government entered power in August 2020 and we continued to advocate tirelessly for the ban on child marriage to become one of the new government's first achievements.

The IDG in 2020 was a great opportunity to double-down on our efforts. For the #GirlsTakeover, we supported 10-year-old Melany to take over President of the Dominican Republic, Luis Abinader for a day where she pushed for the protection and assertion of the rights of Dominican girls. "Mr. President, I will be following up", she was heard to say as she left the National Palace. It was clear that this new government was ready for change.

In November 2020, the president called his ministries and representatives from all political parties to share with the nation that child marriage was a national priority and that he would act to end it. A new law was finally approved, banning child marriage in Dominican Republic. Now, the work continues to change the culture and behaviours that have allowed child marriage to happen.



A 17-year-old Bolivian girl wants to live in an equal society.

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Early gains are not sustained, and gender gaps widen in adolescence and thereafter

The stark difference between gender parity in early and later outcomes is vividly illustrated by the large differences in early development compared to the lasting inequalities between boys and girls once they leave school, which for many vulnerable girls is earlier than for boys. The higher number and proportion of girls who, after they leave school, are NEET compared with boys and the increased number who are in informal or non-permanent education training or employment, is a clear indication that there has been a failure to sustain girls' development across their life course.

Globally, about 267 million young people have NEET status (about one-fifth of the young population); girls and young women aged 15–24 make up the majority.²² In 2019, the NEET rate for girls and young women is much higher than for boys and young men: 42% of young women, compared to 12% of young men, are NEET. There has been no substantial change in the NEET rate for all, including young women, since 2005. It has remained high across all regions, except for Central and Western Asia, where it dropped by 10 percentage points. Young women are at the highest risk of NEET in the Arab States and Southern Asia, where their risk is three and four times higher than that for boys.²³

In addition, once girls become NEET, the risk is much higher for them that they will remain so.²⁴ There is no difference in the number of young girls aged 15–24 who became NEET in the mid-2000s and the number of women aged 25–34 who are NEET ten years later.²⁵

NEET rates amongst girls, as well as the gender gap, are higher in low and middle-income countries, as Table 1 indicates.

TABLE 1 REGIONS WITH THE HIGHEST NEET RATES AMONGST GIRLS IN 2019

REGION	2019	PERCENTAGE CHANGE BETWEEN 2011 AND 2019
Arab States	52%	-2%
Southern Asia	49%	-0.8%
North Africa	36.1	-6%
Latin America and the Caribbean	28.9%	-0.4%
Central and Western Asia	27.9%	-2.8%
Sub-Saharan Africa	23.5%	+0.4%
South East Asia and the Pacific	23.3%	-1.8%

NEET rates are even higher for girls facing multiple adversities such as poor education, poverty, and high rates of CEFMU and family responsibilities. For example, uneducated girls are six times more at risk of being NEET than educated girls, and the rate is much higher amongst uneducated girls than boys.²⁶

This lays the foundation for ever-widening disparities as girls transition into adulthood, and for the persistently high levels of gender equality that the world continues to grapple with.



Girls learn how to make reusable sanitary pads at training workshop (Mali).

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Notably, although women's participation has improved, it remains significantly lower in the workplace and in political leadership positions.

- In 2021, only 55% of women between the ages of 25 and 54, compared to 94% of men who were **participating in the workforce**. There is a persistent lack of women in leadership positions, with women accounting for only 27% of all managerial positions.²⁷ The WEF estimates that **at the current rate of change it will take 267.6 years to close this gap**.²⁸ However, it is likely to take even longer given the impact of COVID-19 and the growing gender disparities in the 21st century workplace.
- COVID-19 has deepened these inequalities. In 2020, 255 million full-time jobs were lost, four times more than in the global financial crisis in 2007–2009. Youth and women were especially hard hit, with employment losses of 8.7% and 5.0%, respectively, in 2020, compared with 3.7% for adults and 3.9% for men.²⁹
- These inequalities are set to deepen even further. Factors such as technology have created opportunities but so too risks of job losses; in a context of a decreasing number of meaningful jobs, entrepreneurship is key to future productivity.

Critically, the foundations of emerging and growing patterns of economic exclusion are determined during adolescence by social norms and their influence on girls' access to, and quality of, education.

A study in Asia-Pacific confirmed that accumulative factors – including gendered expectations about suitable roles and the fact that girls spend three times more time than boys on unpaid care and domestic work, have access to fewer educational and other opportunities for getting the knowledge, skills and connections needed to succeed – influence their choices and aspirations. As a result, by “the time they reach adulthood, these dynamics have compounded to limit their equal economic participation, with huge resulting costs to economies and societies”.³⁰

Slow progress in economic empowerment has resulted in women living in higher levels of poverty than men. Women and girls are 4% more likely to experience extreme poverty, with a substantial increase for women aged 25–34 years, who are 25% more likely to live in poverty.³¹

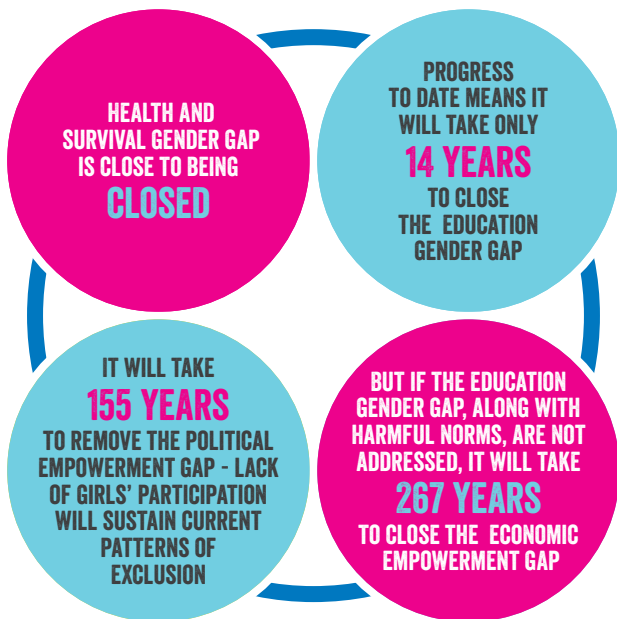
Changing these patterns depends fundamentally on more female leadership in decision-making positions and in developing and implementing gender-responsive laws, policies and budgets on education, employment, and financing. However, progress in improving the political leadership and participation of girls and women has been slow – and in recent years has reversed.

In 2021, the gap in **political empowerment** had closed by only 22% and had widened since 2020. According to the WEF, “Across the 156 countries covered by the [WEF's] index, women occupy just more than a quarter of parliamentary seats and account for only 22.6% of over 3,400 ministers worldwide. In 81 countries, there has never been a woman head of state, as of 15th January 2021.”³² In 2021, the gender gap in political empowerment of women had dropped to 2014 levels.

The WEF estimates that if left unchanged, **it would take 155 years to attain gender parity in politics – which is a significant step backwards compared to 2020**.³³ As in the case of economic empowerment, there is a real risk that it will take even longer to close the gap given the political push-back against gender equality and human rights. This trend has shrunk civic and political space and, between 2015 and 2020, led to a decline in women's “freedom of discussion”.³⁴

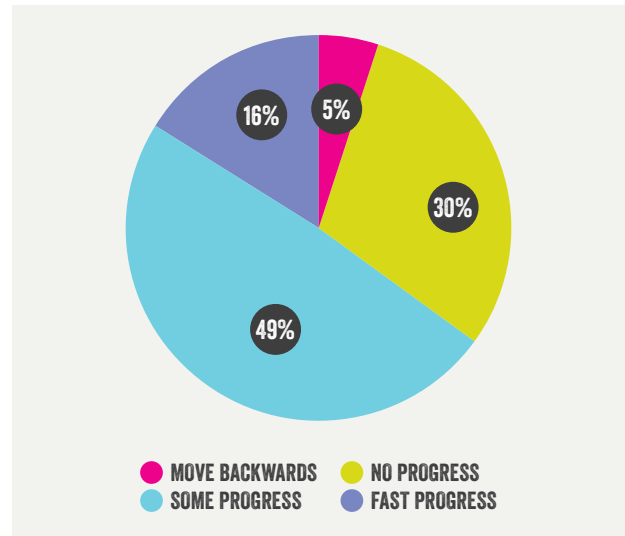
- Gender inequalities escalate from adolescence into ever-widening economic and political exclusions that make it impossible to break intergenerational patterns of poverty and remedy the gender-blind laws and practices at the heart of the lack of progress seen today.

FIGURE 3 FIGURE 3: INEQUALITIES HAVE LONG LASTING CONSEQUENCES FOR REALISING GIRLS' RIGHTS



Thus, it is clear that gains in girls' rights have not been enough to lay the foundations for achieving SDG 5 – lasting gender equality. The 2022 SDG Gender Index recorded a nominal improvement in global gender equality since 2015.³⁵ In 2020, the global score was only 67.8 (out of a possible 100) – an improvement of less than two points since 2015.

GLOBAL PROGRESS TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY 2015-2020: PERCENTAGE OF COUNTRIES ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY AS ENVISIONED IN THE SDGS



Not one of the 144 countries in the SDG Gender Index has achieved gender equality.

Between 2015 and 2020, 91 countries out of 135 with comparable data made progress in achieving gender equality. Of them, 28 made fast progress, and 63, some progress. However, progress has not been fast or robust enough to change trajectories. Countries that improved did so only marginally, with an average 3-point increase; 38 countries made no progress at all; and six lost ground, moving backwards by 1 or more points.³⁶

10 HIGHEST-SCORING COUNTRIES*

- Denmark (scores 90.4, but only a 1-point change in five years)
- Sweden (scores 90.3; 0.1-point change)
- Norway (scores 90.2; 1.5-point change)
- Iceland (scores 89; 0.1-point change)
- Finland (scores 88.9; 0.8-point change)
- Austria (scores 88.7; 1.9-point change)
- Netherlands (scores 88.3; 0.6-point change)
- Switzerland (scores 87.8; 0.6-point change)
- Luxembourg (scores 86.7; 0.2-change)
- Ireland (scores 85.5, with a solid 2.9-change)

10 COUNTRIES WITH THE LARGEST INCREASE IN INDEX SCORE**

- Benin (+9.3 points)
- Saudi Arabia (+8.6 points)
- Armenia (+6.7 points)
- Nepal (+6.7 points)
- Egypt (+5.8 points)
- Moldova (+5.1 points)
- Iraq (+5 points)
- Tajikistan (+5.0 points)
- United Arab Emirates (+5.0 points)
- Senegal (+4.8 points)

COUNTRIES THAT LOST GROUND AND MOVED BACKWARDS

- Venezuela (-6.7 points)
- Afghanistan (-1.7 points)
- Algeria (-1.3 points)
- Belarus (-1.3 points)
- Kuwait (-1.3 points)
- Ecuador (-1.1)

*But with progress slowing in the past five years.
 **But starting from a low baseline and thus still with low scores.

In 2020, there were pockets of improvement, but holistically these have not been enough to empower girls to fulfil their potential and achieve gender equality.

Schoolgirls excited to meet sponsors from the Netherlands (Nepal).
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Drivers of development

As the UN notes, barriers to girls' and young women's participation in employment, training or education "do not suddenly appear in adulthood". The barriers are the compounded result of a failure to address gender inequalities and realise interrelated rights from birth across the life course. Disparities in development outcomes are a result of multiple, intersecting risks that have not been addressed; in turn, deprivations across the life course undermine equal, optimal development. This impedes economic and political participation by girls and women, diminishing their prospects for changing their lives and the enabling environment to sustain progressive advances for the benefit of future generations.³⁸

Ensuring that girls, especially vulnerable girls, develop to their full potential and transition successfully from school into training, tertiary education or employment requires that they are given the capacity, opportunity and support necessary for achieving, and exercising, their potential.

This is dependent on their optimal early cognitive, social and emotional development through access to responsive care, food, nutrition and protection to ensure they do well at school and complete their schooling equipped to move into the world of work.

This in turn requires:

- inclusive, quality education that develops skills and agency, and promotes gender equality through education
- sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services to empower girls and reduce unintended adolescent pregnancies
- girl-focused school retention policies;
- social services and services which prevent and respond to gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against children to enable school participation and the prevention of abuse, exploitation and CEFMU;
- affordable child-care services to enable girls to complete school and/or be employed or run a business even if they have children;
- material and educational support to caregivers to value and protect girls' rights, voice and agency; and,
- crucially, the participation of girls in the design, implementation and monitoring of the required suite of supportive laws, policies and programmes.

Addressing this complex challenge successfully requires integrated programmes to counter the multiple, intersecting risks to realise critical rights to secure girls' equal and optimal development across their life course.

The review now assesses progress in the realisation of these developmentally critical rights. It deals with five clusters of such rights:

- ECD
- inclusive education
- freedom from violence
- sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)
- leadership and participation

CHANGES IN RIGHTS ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

Were there improvements in ECD?

Based on selected indicators of survival, nutrition and access to early learning and care facilities, gender parity in ECD had been achieved already in 2012. These gains were maintained and improved in the past decade. However, overall early-development outcomes for boys and girls, especially the most marginalised, are still poor. Patterns of inequality remain deeply entrenched, and girls and young women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of childcare in the face of social norms and the absence of publicly resourced and regulated early child care and education by the state.

Progress

- Girls' early development was better than boys' in the MDG period, and this remained constant in 2012-2022. As in the decade prior to it, there is gender parity in ECD. Indeed, young girls achieve higher ECD scores than boys in nearly all countries. Improvements were seen in the few countries which had not yet achieved better early outcomes for girls.
- Child mortality dropped to 39 deaths per 1,000 live births for boys and 34 for girls.
- Stunting rates among children decreased by about 8 percentage points. Fewer girls than boys are stunted, with a difference of as much as 4.6 percentage points in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Participation in pre-school programmes increased from 65% in 2010 to 73% in 2019, with gender parity having been achieved in every region.
- Recent years saw an increase in global leadership in efforts to support parents and caregivers, including teen mothers, in providing nurturing care to young children. ECD has been explicitly recognised as a right and development priority; as a result, governments are under a duty to fund and provide protection for girls and women who are mothers in the workplace, as well as to ensure access to safe, quality, affordable early care and education.

Regressions, pauses, gaps

- **ECD outcomes remain unequal:** in low-income countries, children are 14 times more likely to die before age 5 than in high-income countries.⁴³
- Children in fragile humanitarian and conflict-affected situations are at a much higher risk of poor early development. Young children in fragile settings are three times more at risk of death, stunting and generally poor health outcomes.⁴⁴ For example, children affected by the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria experienced high rates of stunting and wasting.⁴⁵
- Participation in organised pre-primary learning varies across regions. In 2019, it stood at 43% in sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 93% in Latin American and the Caribbean.⁴⁶ Participation dropped during the COVID-19 pandemic because early education closed in most countries. This left many children reliant on parents or other caregivers at home, where increased poverty, unsafe conditions and lack of stimulation impacted negatively on their development.⁴⁷
- **Early outcomes for both young boys and girls remain equally poor.** Across the world, young children are not receiving comprehensive nurturing care, since caregivers, especially young mothers, do not receive support in providing it.⁴⁸
- In 2020, almost half (40%) of children below primary-school age needed but cannot access, child care; girls and young women were expected, in the context of gendered social norms, to fill the gap. COVID-19 worsened the burden of care on women and girls.⁵⁰



A young woman from Haiti wants security for girls after the coronavirus pandemic.

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Systemic factors

- The period saw increasing adoption of multisectoral ECD policies that address intersecting risks to nurturing care. By 2020, more than half of the 21 Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) countries had developed a national ECD policy or strategic framework. Whereas only six out of 21 had ECD policies before 2012, this jumped to 13 by 2020. All of the policies recognise the multisectoral nature of ECD, but most are silent on equity issues.⁵¹
- Several countries adopted policies and laws strengthening protection of the rights of mothers in the workplace. For example, since 2011, 23 more countries introduced laws providing the ILO-prescribed maternity leave.⁵² Armenia, Spain, Ukraine and Afghanistan⁵³ introduced paid paternity leave and Colombia, Georgia and Spain introduced paid parental leave.⁵⁴
- Several countries introduced preferential tax policies to encourage provision of child care by private providers and employers, as well as to improve uptake by parents. These include tax credits, deductions, and exemptions.

Challenges

- The changes above have not been adequate in scale and sustainability to address early-child-care and education deficits and inequalities that impact on children's development.
- Conflict, emergency and refugee situations have a strong impact on ECD for a variety of reasons. ECD services are always hard to deliver in combination, but in conflict situations, they are even more fragmented.
- Poverty and lack of access to services in low- and middle-income countries remain a major barrier to support for ECD. Very few countries provide public ECD services: these remain primarily privately provided and poorly regulated, subsidised and monitored.
- Gendered social norms about the caregiving role of women, inadequate legal protection in the workplace, and inadequate public provision and funding of child-care services result in girls and women bearing a disproportionate burden of early child care and education.

Were there improvements in inclusive education?

Basic education is an area where gender parity has been achieved in key respects and maintained over the past decade. Pre-2012 gains in primary school enrolment have stayed in place. However, while secondary enrolment rates have improved, girls remain disadvantaged compared to boys. There has been inadequate and inequitable change in girls' enrolment in and completion of secondary and vocational education; this is also true of attainment of technological skills and competencies to equalise their opportunities and secure their economic, civic and political participation. Skills development and education start too late, often after schooling, and are not available for the millions of girls who never access school.⁵⁵

Although the numbers have shifted, historical patterns of educational exclusion are still much as they were, with the patterns deepening as girls enter adolescence, especially those with intersecting vulnerabilities. The WEF notes that, while the educational equality gap is the smallest, closing it would have a significant impact on closing all other gaps.

Progress

- Fewer girls are out of school. UNESCO notes secondary school enrollment for females increased from 72% in 2012 to 76% in 2020.⁵⁶
- Gender gaps in enrolment and attendance have been declining over the past 20 years, with a gender gap of less than one percentage point remaining in all three levels of education.⁵⁷
- In primary education, more girls achieve minimum proficiency in reading than boys, except in Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Gabon. In maths proficiency, results are more varied, with girls performing better than boys in about half of the countries with available data.⁵⁸
- The number of female youths aged 15–24 years who are illiterate declined from 100 million to 56 million between 1995 and 2018.⁵⁹

Regressions, pauses, gaps

- There are still 5.5 million more girls of primary-school age out of school than boys.⁶⁰
- Inequities persist in completion rates at primary and secondary school. Nearly half of the countries that reported on SDG progress in 2021 had not achieved gender parity in primary school completion rates, and the gap is much higher at upper-secondary levels. Worldwide, four of five girls complete primary school, but only two of five complete upper-secondary school.⁶¹
- Where poverty intersects with other vulnerabilities, girls are more deeply affected. Only 8% and 2% per cent of girls from the poorest households in low-income countries complete lower-secondary and upper-secondary school, respectively.⁶²
- Globally, refugees access education at much lower rates than other children. In 2016, only 61% of refugee children attended primary school, versus 91% of all children. At the secondary level, 23% of refugee children were enrolled compared to 84% of eligible children worldwide.⁶³
- Children affected by conflict and violence have less education and the impact is greater for girls.⁶⁴ For example, females exposed to the Rwandan genocide had 0.3 years comparatively lower education and were 8% less likely to complete primary school.
- Girls do not participate equally in critical subjects such as maths and are not acquiring critical ICT skills due to lower access to technology. As a result, they are not receiving the education needed for economic participation and leadership. Globally, the percentage of females studying engineering, manufacturing, construction or ICT is below 25% in more than two-thirds of countries.⁶⁵

Systemic factors

- About half of the countries in the world have adopted policies or laws on gender equality in education.⁶⁶ Commitments have been actioned through interventions addressing access and retention barriers, including girl-focused scholarships and eliminating school fees.⁶⁷
- There has been a rise of global, regional and national commitments, policies, protective laws, and integrated programmes targeting the prevention of early and unintended pregnancies, protecting the rights of, and ensuring the return and support of, girls who become pregnant early to enable them to complete their education.⁶⁸ For example, in 2015, Sierra Leone banned pregnant girls from schools. However, the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States ruled this to be discriminatory and it was lifted in 2019.⁶⁹

- A number of countries have supported girls' enrolment in STEM subjects. For example, Germany established an online information hub on STEM for girls as a collaborative between the ministries of women, youth, labour and social affairs that resulted in an increase in the number of girls enrolled and succeeding in these subjects.⁷⁰

Challenges

- Many schools still do not provide inclusive infrastructure. In 2018, one-fifth of primary schools did not provide safe, single-sex sanitation facilities and 335 million girls go to schools that do not have facilities essential for menstrual hygiene.⁷¹
- GBV in school remains a driver of exclusion. Girls continue to experience verbal and sexual harassment, abuse and violence. Children whose gender expressions does not fit binary gender norms also experience high levels of violence. In the United Kingdom, almost half (45%) of lesbian, gay and bisexual students, and three-quarters (64%) of transgender students were bullied in schools.⁷²
- The curricula of many countries are not inclusive. For example, in Europe, 23 out of 49 countries do not address sexual orientation and gender identity explicitly in their curricula.⁷³



A 16-year-old wants to live in an equal society (Paraguay).

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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION – INSIGHTS FROM THE *REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES* STUDY

Improvements in primary school access across the globe benefited girls on the study, all of whom attended school. Girls and their caregivers recognise education is important for girls to realise their dreams, aspirations and economic freedom.

“IF THEY WILL FINISH THEIR STUDIES, THEY CAN LOOK FOR BETTER JOBS AND THEY WILL HAVE BETTER LIVES.”

ROSAMIE'S FATHER,
THE PHILIPPINES, 2019

However, there is a continuing tension amongst parents. While they recognise how important education is for girls, the right is seen as a trade-off: as a drain on scarce resources, especially when girls are not seen to be performing academically.

“I WANT HER TO IMPROVE IN HER ACADEMICS SUCH THAT SHE CAN STUDY AND BE A BETTER PERSON ... BUT ... YOU CAN LOSE HOPE BECAUSE YOU ARE JUST WASTING THE MONEY ON SOMEONE NOT PERFORMING WELL. BECAUSE I CAN USE THAT MONEY FOR BUILDING MYSELF A HOUSE, BUT I END UP GIVING TEACHERS MY MONEY.”

SYLVIA'S MOTHER, UGANDA, 2019

For many girls and their families, the pressures of poverty, social norms and early pregnancy proved too much, and they, like so many other girls worldwide, did not get to participate fully or complete secondary and third level education. For girls in Uganda, the lack of school fees causes worry and is seen as something that could prevent them from fulfilling their ambitions:

“I WAS ABSENT FOR A WHOLE TERM ... BECAUSE OF SCHOOL FEES ... IT MADE ME FEEL BAD BECAUSE I WAS NOT STUDYING.”

BETI, AGED 13, 2019

Layla (Benin) – has her family's support to continue at school. However, underlying poverty dynamics and questions about the returns to be gained by way of concrete opportunities have led her to drop out of formal education.

By 2021, Layla was working as a live-in domestic employee with a family. Previously, her family had encouraged her to continue her schooling – even in years when they reported having experienced financial difficulties and difficulty meeting their food needs:

“IF LAYLA DECIDED TO WORK HARD AT SCHOOL, I WOULD INVEST ALL MY MONEY TO HELP HER REALISE HER DREAMS. I DON'T HAVE ANY MONEY BUT IF SHE ENCOURAGED ME, I WOULD TRY AGAIN WITH MY BUSINESS.”

LAYLA'S MOTHER, 2018

Layla performed well at school over the years – coming first in her class in 2018 and receiving an award, as well as progressing to her next grade in 2019, something which brought pride to her mother and grandmother. Over the years, Layla has spoken about her ambitions to do well at school:

“I ALWAYS DO MY WORK QUICKLY AND I DO MY SCHOOLWORK WELL SO THAT I CAN BECOME SOMEONE IMPORTANT IN THE FUTURE.”

LAYLA, AGED 13, 2019

At the same time, she speaks from an early age about her desire to pursue a vocational course and generate an income. Although in 2020, she dropped out of school temporarily, her mother was able to convince her to go back to school:

“SHE WANTED TO LEAVE SCHOOL AND TAKE UP AN APPRENTICESHIP, BUT SHE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TRADE SHE WANTED TO LEARN. I DIDN'T WANT HER TO DO THIS ... YOU HAVE TO BE OVER 15 AND HAVE BEEN AWARDED YOUR CEP.”

LAYLA'S MOTHER, 2019

However, by 2021 – when Layla turned 15 – she decided to stop going to school, stating:

“I COULD NO LONGER REMEMBER THE LESSONS ... I TRIED TO REMEMBER WHAT I'D BEEN TAUGHT, BUT I COULDN'T.”

It appears that Layla considered she could no longer 'keep up' or see the value in what she was learning.

Upon leaving, her parents told her she would have to get a job and use some of the money to fund an apprenticeship – which led to her beginning work in domestic service. It is clear that pursuing a trade has remained a firm ambition for Layla, who talks about her current reality, alongside her hopes for what it will facilitate in terms of generating the means to fulfil her ambitions:

“ HERE, I DO HOUSEWORK; SWEEPING THE COURTYARD, CLEANING THE KITCHEN AND SHOP ... LATER, I AM GOING TO LEAVE HERE TO TRAIN AS A HAIRDRESSER, I WILL PAY FOR MY COURSE WITH WHATEVER I EARN HERE. ”

LAYLA, AGED 15, 2021

Although she appears to have the support of her employer, who states that it is her intention to sit down with Layla's parents and discuss placing her in an apprenticeship, Layla's current reality is one dominated by housework leaving little time for other activities:

“ I WORK ALL DAY UNTIL THE EVENING AND EVEN THEN, I DON'T ALWAYS STOP. IT'S A LOT OF WORK HERE AND IT TAKES ALL MY TIME. ”

LAYLA, AGED 15, 2021

Layla's experience highlights the complexities that surround education and the ability for girls to make transitions and study subjects that are considered 'valuable' in the context of wider pressures and priorities.



A 17-year-old writes 'No to violence' on the blackboard in the classroom (Mozambique).

© Plan International

Were there improvements in freedom from violence?

The past ten years have seen some shifts with regard to specific forms of violence against girls and women and harmful practices, notably CEFMU and female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C). However, on the whole, there has been little, if any, systemic and lasting improvement in creating safe environments where girls are free from violence. After a decade or more of prolific policies, laws, programmes and many campaigns, violence against girls and women is described by UN Women and the World Bank as a global pandemic.⁷⁴

It is a challenge to assess progress given the lack of agreed indicators representing freedom from violence, and given the lack of reliable, comparable data over time. Based on available data, some progress has been observed, but the overwhelming conclusion is that progress has been far too slow, fragmented and easily undone.



A 15-year-old had her education disrupted by COVID-19 (Honduras).
© Plan International

Progress

The proportion of young women married as children decreased by 15% in the past ten years. The rate dropped from nearly 1 in 4 to 1 in 5 and progress has been significant in areas previously marked by high levels of child marriage.⁷⁵

Regressions, pauses, gaps

- Nearly one in three women (736 million) have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence at least once since the age of 15. Violence against women and girls increased during COVID-19.⁷⁶
- Girls in conflict situations are at a higher risk of violence. Between 2005 and 2020, 14,200 children in conflict situations were raped, forcibly married, sexually exploited, or experienced other forms of sexual violence: 97% of the affected children were girls.⁷⁷
- No region is on track to meet the SDG target of eliminating CEFMU by 2030.⁷⁸ Ten million more girls will be at risk of CEFMU because of the COVID-19 pandemic-2020 saw the largest surge in girls becoming brides in 25 years.^{79,80}
- Progress in reducing FGM/C has not been achieved in all countries and has declined at different paces. It is estimated that more than 200 million girls and women have experienced FGM/C in 30 countries and that 4.1 million girls were at risk in 2020.⁸¹ The practice is most prevalent in the West and Central Africa Region – home to 17 out of the 27 African countries where FGM/C is routinely practiced.

Systemic factors

- Additional global and regional supporting instruments have been issued to aid countries to understand how to strengthen implementation to fulfil their commitments to ending gender-based violence. For example, in 2014, the UNCRC and CEDAW published a joint Revision of Joint General comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices, and General Recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women⁸² provides a suite of operational recommendations for strengthening responses to address historical and emerging harmful practices and social norms.
- In 2021, the UNCRC adopted General comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment.⁸³ It recognises the opportunities and risks to children's rights in the digital age, and calls on Member States to take measures to empower children to capitalise on opportunities and protect them from risks, including the risks of violence, abuse and exploitation. It does not, however, make special mention of the risks faced by girls.
- Parliamentarians have passed an unprecedented amount of legislation on ending violence against girls and women.⁸⁴ For example, in 2016, El Salvador amended its Family Code to abolish child marriage, establishing the marriage age at 18.⁸⁵
- Governments of 24 of the 29 FGM/C-prevalent countries in Africa have adopted laws prohibiting the practice. Sudan criminalised FGM/C in 2022.

Challenges

- Despite the proliferation of laws, there are still critical policy and legal gaps. Seventy-five percent of countries failed to set a minimum age of 18 for marriage for women and men, with no exceptions.⁸⁷
- Increased regulation and laws addressing violence and abuse have not made a significant impact because of the failure

to strengthen implementation measures, especially the adoption of policies and laws that identify and respond to the specific risks for girls particularly during adolescence. More is needed to strengthen coordination arrangements, develop programmes at scale (with adequate and sustainable funding) to eradicate the underlying social and economic drivers of violence, notably harmful social norms and poverty.⁸⁸

CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE AND UNIONS (CEFMU) – INSIGHTS FROM THE *REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES* STUDY

The high-level focus on ending child, early, forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) since the inaugural International Day of the Girl in 2012 has seen advances in commitments to increasing the minimum age of marriage, as well as to providing support for those who have experienced CEFMU. Evidence from *Real Choices, Real Lives* shows a shift in how early and forced marriage is viewed by girls and their caregivers, with prevailing attitudes across countries being that it is unacceptable:

“IT IS NOT RIGHT, BECAUSE WE SHOULD NOT FORCE GIRLS TO MARRY AT A YOUNG AGE.”

LINA, AGED 15, CAMBODIA, 2021

“I'M ANGRY! YOU DON'T FORCE YOUR CHILD INTO MARRIAGE, WHY?”

REYNA'S FATHER,
THE PHILIPPINES, 2021

Yet, evidence from *Real Choices, Real Lives* also reflects that there is a disconnect between policy and practice, with early unions still normalised in many contexts, even where marriage laws have been changed and with little recourse to protect girls. In El Salvador and the Dominican Republic, legislation was changed in 2017 bringing the legal age of marriage to 18, without exceptions. In both contexts, these changes closed loopholes that previously permitted girls to be married under the age of 18 if they were pregnant, or had an older partner, or with parental/judicial consent. In both countries, the legal age of consent is 18 and there are no close-in-age exemptions in either context. Girls in both countries show an awareness of the law as well as of the potentially negative outcomes of early marriage and pregnancy:

“IT'S AGAINST THE LAW TO FORCE A GIRL TO GET MARRIED.”

SUSANA, EL SALVADOR, AGED 15, 2021

“THEY GET MARRIED SO QUICKLY THAT THE WOMAN CAN GET PREGNANT AND THE CHILD CAN COME OUT WITH PROBLEMS.”

DARIANA, AGED 12,
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2018

Yet, despite this, many of the girls and their caregivers spoke about how it is common for girls as young as 13 to enter relationships and unions and live with older partners, including adult men, with cases of early pregnancy reported:

“I THINK IT'S ALWAYS BEEN THE SAME WAY HERE; IT HASN'T CHANGED FOR THE BETTER, IT'S STILL THE SAME. YES, BECAUSE MOST CHILDREN HERE ENTER UNIONS AT A VERY YOUNG AGE.”

STEPHANY'S MOTHER, EL SALVADOR, 2021

“MOST GIRLS FROM THE AGE OF 13 ONWARDS HERE, THEY START GETTING MARRIED, HAVING BOYFRIENDS.”

DARIANA'S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2014

Early unions are often discussed as a girl's “choice”, rather than something they have been forced or coerced into, and caregivers feel unable to prevent them, even despite legal frameworks existing - including related to age of consent. By the age of 14, one of the girls in El Salvador, Hillary,

was living with her 25-year-old partner and was in the early stages of pregnancy. Although Hillary does not share details about her relationship or pregnancy, only stating that she no longer lives at home (*"Now I'm no longer at home ... I moved in with someone"* (2021)), her mother talks openly about her daughter's union. She describes that, although she felt worried about her daughter entering a relationship, she ultimately accepted it as she was unable to dissuade her:

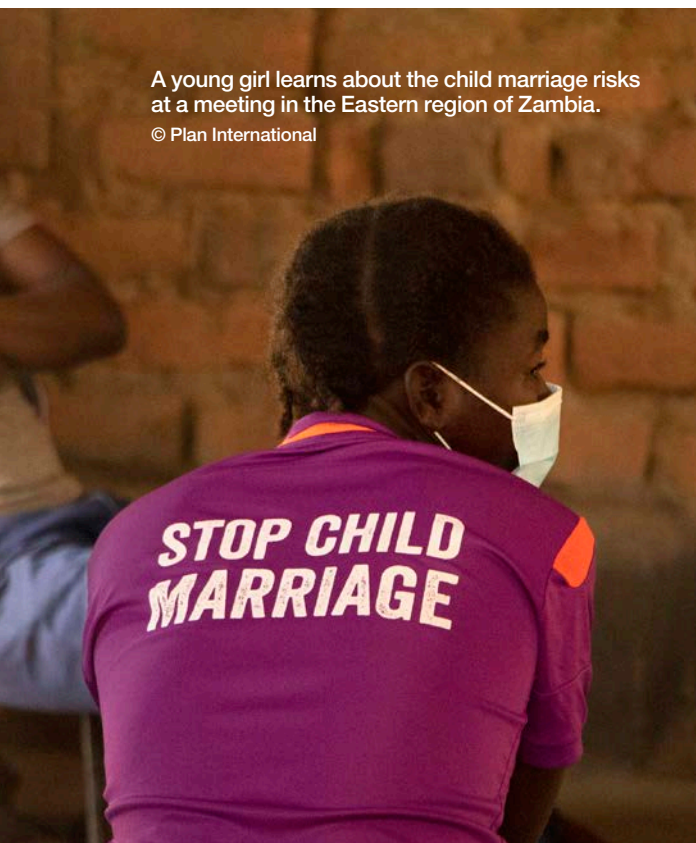
“ SHE WENT OFF WITH A GUY, SHE'S 14 YEARS OLD, RIGHT, AND THE GUY IS 25 ... I DON'T KNOW WHY SHE DIDN'T LISTEN TO US, NO MATTER HOW MUCH WE ADVISED HER ... THIS IS THE SECOND TIME SHE'S ENTERED INTO A UNION BUT SHE'S FINE NOW, THIS ONE TAKES GOOD CARE OF HER, HE'S YOUNGER THAN THE FIRST ONE. ”

HILLARY'S MOTHER, EL SALVADOR, 2021

In many cases, it appears there is little recourse to action – with informal unions, which are not recognised by the church or the state, falling beyond the purview of government agencies. Gladys, aged 15, in El Salvador talks explicitly about the response the Police give if caregivers raise issues about daughters in unions with older men:

“ SOME OF THEM [GET MARRIED] WITH A KID THEIR OWN AGE, BUT SOME ALSO ENTER UNIONS WITH MUCH OLDER MEN. NO, NO ONE DOES ANYTHING, THEIR MUMS TRY TO GET HELP ... THE POLICE SAY THAT IF SHE WENT OF HER OWN FREE WILL, THEY CAN'T DO ANYTHING, EVEN IF SHE'S UNDER-AGE. ”

GLADYS, AGED 15, EL SALVADOR, 2021



A young girl learns about the child marriage risks at a meeting in the Eastern region of Zambia.

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Were there improvements in SRHR?

The last decade has seen an increase of concern in the international community about slow progress in implementing the many global and regional commitments to realise girls SRHR. The international community and treaty bodies, through collective review processes, have recognised that implementation has slowed. The reviews culminated in a number of recommitments to strengthen specific enablers key to reversing losses and accelerating progress for girls.

However, progress slowed considerably in the past decade. SRHR is an area that has been targeted by the anti-gender movement, resulting in multiple legal challenges to progressive laws, the failure of many institutions to adhere to progressive laws, and validation of widespread and growing opposition to sexuality education and rights by educators, parents, community members and politicians, on the grounds of this being contrary to traditional family, religious and cultural values.⁸⁹ This has contributed to deteriorating outcomes for girls' SRHR.

Progress

- The global adolescent birth rate amongst girls aged 15–19 dropped from 47 to 41.2 births per 1,000 between 2012 to 2020.
- Over the past ten years, HIV incidence among adults aged 15 to 49 declined by 24%.⁹⁰ HIV incidence has fallen in many of the most severely affected countries because adolescents and young people are adopting safer sexual practices.⁹¹
- Girls with comprehensive knowledge on HIV/AIDS are able to negotiate for safer sex compared with those who had no comprehensive knowledge on HIV/AIDS.⁹²

Regressions, pauses, gaps

- Globally, the unmet need for modern contraceptive methods in girls and women 15–49 has not shifted from 77% since 2015. Initial improvements in the use of contraception by married and sexually active 15- to 19-year-old women were reversed. In Sierra Leone, the number originally doubled from 10% to 20% between 2008 and 2013, but dropped to just 14% in 2019. This drop coincided with a decision to end CSE in schools.⁹⁴
- In 2019, 43% of sexually active girls (15–19) who wanted to avoid pregnancy were not using modern contraception. This led to 10 million unintended pregnancies and 5.7 million abortions.⁹⁵
- Globally, in 2020, girls accounted for three-quarters of all new HIV infections among adolescents.⁹⁶ Eighty-nine percent of adolescents living with HIV live in sub-Saharan Africa.⁹⁷ Whilst making up only 10% of the population, girls and young women (15–24) account for 25% of HIV infections in the region.⁹⁸

Systemic factors

- In 2013, governments of 21 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) endorsed the ESA Commitment to deliver CSE and SRH services to ensure improved protection and development outcomes for girls, these commitments were reviewed, and reaffirmed in 2016. In 2014, 54 African Union Member States endorsed the Luanda Commitment on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in Africa, committing to universalise youth-friendly health services for adolescents.
- Many countries adopted laws and integrated strategies domesticating their commitments to strengthen the protection and realisation of girls' SRHR. By 2020, 34 countries had

developed national action plans to implement the commitments made at the 2019 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD+25) in Nairobi and integrating commitments into national or sector policies and/or developing systems to monitor progress.⁹⁹

Challenges

- Negative social norms manifested through opposition by parents, religious leaders and teachers to CSE limits its provision and success in empowering girls.¹⁰⁰
Legal gains protecting the right to CSE have come under attack. Brazil's legislature at federal, state, and municipal levels have introduced over 200 legislative proposals to ban "indoctrination" or "gender ideology" in Brazilian schools with the aim of suppressing CSE in schools. In 2020, 21 laws directly or indirectly banning gender and sexuality education remain in force in Brazil.¹⁰¹
- The rights of children in the LGBTIQ+ community remain at risk because of weak legal protection and slow law reform to undo the colonial legacy of often violent opposition to and criminalisation of same-sex relationships. Law-makers have, contrary to their treaty obligations, been slow to criminalise hate crimes and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation. LGBTIQ+ children have experienced weak legal protection, increased violence and discrimination, and their freedom of expression and choice has been curtailed.
- While several countries have improved legal protection of access to safe abortion, others, notably Nicaragua, Poland and the United States have repealed laws previously protecting the right to safe abortion. In 2022, the Supreme Court of the United States overturned the seminal precedent set by *Roe v Wade* and declared that the constitution did not protect the right to safe abortion, thus opening the gate for states to outlaw abortion.¹⁰²
- There has been little legal progress in protecting the rights of LGBTIQ+ people. In 2020, there are still 70 countries, that criminalise consensual same sex activity.
- Funding of SRH and services remains very low, and has in recent years been reduced further in the wake of emergencies such as COVID-19. In fact, between 2010 and 2018 there was a notable increase in "anti-gender" funding. The European Parliamentary Forum recorded that 54 organizations generated \$707.2 million for such activities between 2009 to 2018.¹⁰³

Were there improvements in participation and leadership?

Girls have become vocal and visible advocates on issues affecting them, and in formulating and shaping decisions about how to remedy them. Girls' meaningful and sustained participation in governments' processes for fulfilling treaties is key to successful transformation. Although anecdotal evidence suggests there has been some progress on the advocacy front, available evidence suggests that girls continue to be excluded from meaningful and sustained participation in the design, development, delivery and monitoring of global and national laws and policies— currently in the hands of adults, some women, but mostly men.

Progress

- Since 2012, girls have exercised their civic and political rights to advocate for change across the globe – in school, local and some national agendas. For example, case studies show that they:¹⁰⁴
 - Advocated successfully for the distribution of free sanitary items for menstrual hygiene at school or essential products in refugee centres.
 - Helped girls escape FGM/C.
 - Rescued girls and women who were survivors of human trafficking.
 - Advocated for human rights education in schools and raised awareness of gender inequality and human rights within their communities.
 - Undertook campaigns to de- stigmatise testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
 - Led climate change advocacy in several countries.
- Girls have attested to having been proactive and increasingly used social media to organize, mobilize, network, campaign and advocate. Likewise, girls and young women's participation outside formal political channels often takes place through various forms of collective action where girl-led organisation typically adopt flatter less hierarchal structures with 'Fridays for Future (FFF)', the well-known climate movement that Greta Thunberg works with being a case in-point.



A girl shares her experience at the *Girls Lead* project workshop (Cambodia).
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Regressions, pauses and gaps

- In the absence of data, it is difficult to quantify the deficits. It is, however, recognised that girls' formal, systematic and sustained participation in global and national decision-making, policy-making, monitoring and accountability platforms remains weak.¹⁰⁵
- Young women are severely under-represented in politics. Only 40% of the meagre 2.6% of the world's parliamentarians under 30 are women.¹⁰⁶
- At national and local levels, their participation is curtailed by multiple factors, including a generally shrinking civic space, the growing anti-gender movement, and high levels of violence, intimidation and abuse when they exercise their rights to express their views.¹⁰⁷ The scale and pace at which the civic space for girls and women's participation is shrinking is illustrated by the poor scoring of the EM2030 index indicator on women's "freedom of discussion" that worsened globally between 2015 and 2020.¹⁰⁸

Systemic factors

- There have been positive developments supporting girls' increased participation. For example, improved access to technology and media has created a space for their voice outside of routine participatory platforms.
- Treaty bodies have taken longer-term systemic steps to ensure the sustained and meaningful participation of children, and girls, in their various policy and accountability processes. For example, in 2021, the UNCRC initiated a systematic participatory process to run over a period of three years for the collaborative development with children, including girls, of a general comment on climate change.¹⁰⁹
- In 2022, the Human Rights Council engaged with girls' to develop a report and recommendations on girls' and young women's activism.¹¹⁰

Challenges

- Young women and those from marginalised backgrounds face a host of legal, economic and socio-cultural barriers to exercising their voice. These range from laws governing the legal age of participation in politics, to gendered norms and socialisation, as well as child-care responsibilities.¹¹¹
- Discriminatory laws and legal gaps include the lack of legal protection of the rights of girls to vote and/or stand for office, and the lack of regulation with regards to legal quotas for girls, in for example, children's parliaments and school governing bodies. Quotas are a proven mechanism for increasing women's participation in politics. In 2020, more than half of the countries with data lacked quotas for women in national parliaments, and close to one-fifth maintained discriminatory nationality laws.¹¹²
- Inequities in access to information and technology and the failure to protect girls in social media and when using media serve to undermine their participation. However, gender disparities in access to technology are wide. Males across 90 countries are 7.1 percentage points more likely to own mobile phones than females.¹¹³ In addition, whilst technology offers a tremendous opportunity, it also exposes girls and young women to higher risks of abuse – a risk that has also served to shut down girl's voices.¹¹⁴
- It is difficult to assess with any certainty how much progress has been made in the past decade in strengthening girls' participation and leadership because there are no standard measurements of progress or regular reports on their improved participation.



Girls, like this 14-year-old, has been the most affected by the disruption in education due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Honduras).

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LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION – INSIGHTS FROM THE *REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES* STUDY

Improvements to women and girls' participation in politics and representation in leadership roles is an area that has seen visible investments from governments globally yet remains severely limited. The persistence of negative attitudes towards their participation in civic and political life continues to present barriers for girls and young women in taking on leadership roles.

Hang (aged 16 in 2022) is part of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort study in Vietnam. She lives in the north-eastern province of Thái Nguyên with her younger brother, her father who is a farmer, and her mother who is an official in the local government. Hang is aware of women leaders in the Vietnamese government from seeing them on TV and in her community, she also sees women, including her mother, in positions of leadership, which for her is symbolically important:

“ I THINK THEIR LEADERSHIP PROVES GENDER EQUALITY. ”

HANG, AGED 16, 2022

Hang herself is actively involved in a group for schoolgirls of ethnic minorities through which she participates in campaigns and skills development. Hang is aware of the rights and mechanisms she has to participate in decision-making in her community:

“ ... AT SCHOOL WE WERE TAUGHT THAT WE ALSO HAVE RIGHTS. SO, I CAN GO TO THE DELEGATE TO GIVE MY OPINION ON A DECISION WE HAVE TO TAKE. I CAN WRITE A LETTER TO THE DISTRICT CHIEF AND THE MAYOR. ”

HANG, AGED 16, 2022

Women and girls' participation in civic and political life appears to be normalised in Hang's community, however, she also reports that negative attitudes are often voiced against women leaders:

“ SOME PEOPLE MAY SPEAK ILL OF FEMALE LEADERS. SOME PEOPLE CAN'T ACCEPT THE SITUATION IN WHICH WOMEN ARE LEADERS ... I HEAR SOME NEGATIVE IDEAS SUCH AS 'SHE [HER MOTHER] IS PROMOTED BECAUSE SHE IS A WOMAN'. ”

HANG, AGED 16, 2022

Hang has also seen that women leaders are held to stricter standards than men and are criticised more: “if a male leader and a female leader make the same mistake, the female leader will be blamed more seriously”.

She says that this pressure deters her from wanting to take on a public role in the future, despite her interest in politics and her desire to become a leader.

Her mother's role in the local government appears to have influenced Hang's engagement in social and political issues and she discusses her opinions and ideas with her mother. Her mother's role has also impacted on their household dynamics, in particular around the division of domestic responsibilities with Hang's father. In the past, Hang's mother has explained that her husband carries out most of the household chores because she does not have time due to her job, which is different from the traditional gender roles that other families in her community follow: “*Almost all women do the chores because we think it seems to be women's tasks*” (Hang's mother, 2017). Hang herself has said that she believes that this is a fair division of labour because her mother is “*busier*” and because “*men and women are equal*” (Hang, aged 10, 2016). This dynamic was not always accepted by Hang's father, however, who Hang (2022) explains “*didn't support much in the past ... my father did not agree with my mother's going to work all the week*” and who still “*grumbles a little*” when she stays out late for work.

Hang's case demonstrates the importance of representation in normalising the involvement of women and girls in the political sphere, however it is also clear that harmful attitudes rooted in traditional gender roles persist in limiting girls' aspirations to take on roles in public life:

“ THERE SHOULD BE REGULATIONS TO IDENTIFY GIRLS' RIGHTS AND PROTECT GIRLS MORE BECAUSE NOT EVERYBODY RESPECTS THE THOUGHT OF GENDER EQUALITY. SOME PEOPLE STILL KEEP THE OUTDATED THOUGHT OF THE OLD SOCIETY THAT VALUES MEN ABOVE WOMEN. ”

HANG, AGED 16, 2022

An 18-year-old has been able to resume her education with Plan's support (Laos).

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WHERE DID WE LAND IN 2022?

TRANSFORMATION WAS NOT ACHIEVED

2012–2022 saw significant improvements in realising girls' rights. Compared to the girls of the past, many more today are safer from certain forms of abuse, develop to their full potential, and lead initiatives to shape a better world for themselves and future generations.

In the year of the 10th IDG, there is cause to celebrate; yet there is also pause for thought.

Change has not been equitable; it has been slow; it has been brittle; and many girls, especially those who face intersecting risks, are left behind. The rights of children from the LGBTQTIQ+ community, children in humanitarian and conflict situations, displaced girls, and girls in poverty and/or rural areas, remain unrealised. Where gains are made, they are fragile and easily threatened by humanitarian crises and other shocks, with COVID-19 being an example.

Another disturbing threat is the rising anti-rights movement, which is championed by conservative politicians who denounce gender equality and the rights of girls, women and members of the LGBTQ+ community as violations of traditional family, religious and cultural values.

SO, ON BALANCE, WHERE WE END UP IN 2022 IS LITTLE DIFFERENT FROM WHERE WE BEGAN IN 2012: PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE, BUT THIS HAS NOT AMOUNTED TO TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE.

The story the data tells us today is not fundamentally different to the one a decade ago. Patterns of exclusion are much the same, as are their causes, which are unaddressed. The lives of the women who were girls 10 years ago have wound up as more or less the same as their mothers'. Far too many of the girls moving into adulthood have limited power to make decisions in their best interests. They remain excluded – educationally, socially, economically, politically.



A 19-year-old enjoys doing traditional embroidery work (Guatemala).
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PROGRAMMATIC RESPONSES ARE TOO WEAK

What does this uneven progress indicate?

Rights are not being realised across a girls' life course through the provision of evidence-based, integrated programmes that address the intersecting risks which have fuelled intergenerational patterns of exclusion and gender inequalities.

For example:

- Responses to harmful social norms have been inadequate for transforming them. Harmful social norms, patriarchal values and attitudes, discrimination, and stigma remain unaddressed. With the growing anti-rights movement, they have become more deeply entrenched at not only a family and community level but a leadership and decision-making level. This has led to legal challenges to progressive laws, reductions in funding, and validation of harmful social norms.
- Poverty remains unaddressed, impacting on the resilience of girls and women to withstand shocks. A major gap is the failure to provide comprehensive social security for girls and their families to address a leading cause of gender inequality.¹¹⁵ Where safety nets do exist, few provide girl-targeted support to mitigate girls' heightened and unique risks.

The reason for the lack of progress is systemic. Social norms have been dealt with by short-lived campaigns rather than systematically in a sustained manner to change the values, attitudes and practices of the incoming generation, who on the whole continue to be influenced by the norms of the current and previous generations of adults.

The trap needs to be broken through a holistic, life-course, and gender-transformative approach that provides sustained, population-wide, evidence-based measures all to sectors with a mandate to do so – doing so through well-resourced programmes that join up across the life course of every child and that are provided by well-trained caregivers, educators, health workers and social workers across the continuum of caregiving learning and support.¹¹⁶ A gender-transformative approach works to target the root causes of inequality, including shifting harmful norms and empowering girls and women, and should be at the core of laws, policies and budgets focused on achieving the rights of girls.

Support for developing positive social norms, values and practices needs to be embedded across the full suite of enablers and programmes spanning the life cycle of girls.



A 16-year old, who had to stop going to school during the COVID-19 lockdown, collects firewood at her home (Guatemala).

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SYSTEMIC ENABLERS ARE INADEQUATE

It is apparent that, across each of the rights reviewed, common key enablers have not been developed to ensure the deployment of legally sound, well-resourced and coordinated transformative responses. Among other things, the following ingredients are weak or missing:

- Clear, unambiguous legal mandates and accountability mechanisms to address intersecting risks across the whole of the life course of the girl, with appropriate measures that respond to the unique risks and vulnerabilities that girls faced at different stages of their development.
- Comprehensive legal recognition and protection of girls' rights.
- Evidence-based multisectoral programmes that eradicate the intersecting risks.
- Strong coordination and oversight of multiple role-players to ensure collaborative planning of strategies and joined-up provisioning of services that recognise and address girls' vulnerabilities in all sectors, from ECD, to education, to protection, to climate change, and emergency response plans.
- Adequate human and financial resources to secure effective implementation to bring about population-scale change from the bottom up.
- IMS to inform responsive planning, monitor agreed outcomes for girls, and ensure accountability for those outcomes.

Remedying these gaps and omissions requires, first and foremost, a clear, strong, shared accountability framework, plus clarity as to the systemic enablers that are needed, with appropriate standards and guidelines set out. This is the function of the international enabling framework made up of treaties, general comments and implementation guidelines.

Ten years ago, concerns were raised about the adequacy of the global rights-based framework in ensuring the visibility of girls' rights and providing direction on implementation measures that should be taken to realise these rights.

As a result, in the past decade a number of developments took place at the global and regional level to put the spotlight on these rights and give clearer, more detailed guidance on how to address specific issues and systemic weaknesses preventing their realisations. However, there are still important gaps in, among others, governing treaties, laws, programmes, resources, and monitoring.

The girls' and wider gender-rights movements have ensured, through initiatives like the IDG, reflection on and identification of gaps in the enabling system. This has resulted in stronger girl-centred guidance from treaty bodies and commitments from development partners to strengthen the systemic enablers.

However, after ten years of commitments, the promises have remained unrealised. They have not led to direct investments. Only a fraction of international aid budgets is spent on meeting the needs of girls.¹¹⁷



A young girl from Ecuador, a country working towards zero tolerance for discrimination and inequality towards girls.


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This report identifies some of the remaining gaps that must be prioritised and concretely resolved in the next decade. These include:

- **The global enabling framework is more explicit on girls' rights.** Girls' rights are mentioned, but the duty to act on implementation responsibilities for girls remains implicit and easily overlooked. International treaties and development instruments do not provide adequately explicit directives, guidance and accountability on the importance of integrated programming and the measures required to fulfil this responsibility. Where intersecting risks are recognised, the instruments tend to speak to either children as a group or to women..
- **Girls, especially adolescent girls continue to fall through the cracks.**¹¹⁸ There has been some progress in this regard, but not enough. For example, the UNCRC adopted General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence.¹¹⁹ It recognises that adolescence is a period of sensitive development and risks that are neglected by countries across the globe. It provides guidance on implementation measures to address the gap. It further recognises that girls, LGBTQTIQ+, indigenous and other adolescent minorities experience multiple, intersecting risks and calls on Member States to adopt measures to counter these. However, General Comment 20 provides generic guidelines for all adolescents, rather than guidelines tailored to the specific risks faced by girls.
- **The direction required to strengthen national laws and supporting systems has not been provided.** The gaps at an international level contribute to weak national policies and laws. For example, whilst there has been a significant growth in multisectoral ECD policies recognising intersecting risks and vulnerabilities and directing integrated responses to address these, including for girls, there has not been a similar development of multisectoral adolescent policies, with a focus on the specific risks girls face.
- In the absence of policies and laws mandating integrated responses, programmes remain siloed, budgets are not allocated, and intended results are not achieved.
- A significant factor is the **inadequacy of data, measurement and accountability tools** to inform planning and measure progress in development of girls at different stages and accumulatively across their life course. As noted above, the absence of a girls' rights-based development index is problematic. In addition, survey data and the indicators used to measure gender parity in outcomes are inadequate. They fail to generate data required for evidence-based planning and disguise the true extent of persisting inequalities.
- **Cutting across all of these gaps is the absence of adolescent girls in routine decision-making platforms where indices, indicators, policies and programmes are developed.**¹²⁰

CONCLUSION

As a consequence of the shortcomings identified in this review, in 2020 more than three billion girls and women still lived in countries with “poor” or “very poor” scores for gender equality. Whilst progress has been made, compared to 2012, in the number of girls for whom some rights are realised, the growth in the youth population means that overall numbers of girls denied their rights have increased. Some gains made in the previous decade have since been lost, and previous deprivations have deepened because of emerging risks and changing contexts.



A 12-year old and her younger sister who lives in a community that struggled with a scarcity of clean water for drinking, washing and cooking (Indonesia).

© Plan International

The scale and complexity of the gender equality gap for girls has and is set to grow in the absence of transformation given a number of changes in the socio-political and economic context. The world in which girls live and the associated opportunities and challenges have changed which, added to previously unmet imperatives, has widened the gap in the unfinished girl’s rights agenda.

On the eve of the 10th IDGC there is consensus that there is an urgent need for accelerated, strategic action to realise girls’ accumulative rights across their life course to achieve equality for all.

Change has been achieved, but not enough to drive transformation because the system remains weak across all critical enablers. Thus, the structural drivers remain unaddressed and have deepened the patterns of inequality.

RECOMMENDATIONS



INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS

Ensure that international legal and policy frameworks, agreements and standards address girls' double burden of gender- and age-based discrimination and commit States to the realisation of girls' rights. This means differentiating girls' human rights from women's rights to acknowledge that girls face challenges that are different from those facing women and recognising the ways in which girls are differently and disproportionately affected compared to boys.

The international community must maintain existing international law guarantees of girls' human rights, their right to equality in all fields of life and their right not to be discriminated against and resist all attempts to roll back from and to politicise issues relating to girls' rights. The strongest and most progressive agreed language available that enables the advancement of girls' rights must be used consistently in international policy and agreements.

States should withdraw all reservations to international human rights and development instruments, including CEDAW, CRC, the SDGs, ICPD, Beijing and other international agreements that provide protections for girls.

The international community must recognise and take urgent action to address the specific rights violations experienced by girls affected by crises, including in situations of armed conflict and forced displacement. This includes ensuring that programmes and policy respond to the unique experiences and gender and age-specific risks faced by girls, supporting humanitarian access and demanding and pursuing accountability for violations of international law affecting girls.



LEGISLATION TO ADVANCE GIRLS' RIGHTS

States should ratify all relevant instruments related to securing political, economic, social and cultural rights for girls – especially CEDAW and CRC - and ensure that they adopt national legislation which is line with international human rights standards. Discriminatory laws, which render girls vulnerable to both age- and gender-based discrimination must be removed or reformed.



IMPLEMENTATION OF LEGISLATION/COMMITMENTS

National legislation and commitments to protect and uphold girls' rights across the life course must be matched with policy and budget commitments to ensure their implementation, and progress should be monitored and reported on. Commitments to girls' rights must be embedded in all relevant development and sectoral plans.

Policies and actions should be focused on aspects of girls' rights where the least progress has been made, and on reducing inequalities. Sustained attention and investment is needed both to reduce inequalities between genders, but also to ensure that girls in all their diversity who experience multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities are not left further behind.

Gender-responsive budgeting should be undertaken at national and local levels to ensure that commitments to gender equality and girls' rights are adequately funded and investments targeted where they will have the greatest impact. Budgeting processes should analyse how government budgets affect people of different genders and ages, along with other intersecting characteristics.

Governments must work with civil society, donors, international actors and the private sector to ensure a multi-sectoral and coordinated approach is taken to realising girls' rights. This includes ensuring effective linkages with and coordination between relevant sectors such as education, protection, health, social protection and justice sectors.

Ensure that before, during and after humanitarian crises, girls' needs are met and their rights are upheld. This means that humanitarian actors, including governments, civil society organisations and international actors must recognise and respond to distinct age, gender and diversity related needs in disaster preparedness, needs assessments and response plans; ensure humanitarian responses are accountable and support the active participation and leadership of girls in humanitarian action.



TACKLING ROOT CAUSES

For changes to laws, policies and budgets to be gender transformative, they must be complemented by actions to tackle the root causes of gender inequality, particularly unequal gender power relations and discriminatory social norms. This involves active engagement with communities, families, children and young people, traditional and religious leaders to raise awareness of the impact of harmful social and gender norms and practices and to mobilise these actors to change these norms and practices.



DATA AND EVIDENCE

Governments should invest in age- and sex-disaggregated data and in closing the data gaps that limit understanding of how inequalities intersect to affect different groups of girls and women. This includes ensuring data on gender-related issues such as unpaid care work, is visible in national statistics. Data must be accessible and must be utilised to ensure that policies benefit girls and increase gender equality and to track progress against commitments.

Invest in the expanding and strengthening the evidence base to ensure that policies and programmes to strengthen girls' rights are grounded in evidence of the most effective interventions.



GIRLS' PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

Governments must provide legal guarantees for girls' participation in decision-making and accountability processes at the national and sub-national levels and meaningfully involve girls and their groups, including the most marginalised, in the design, implementation and monitoring, evaluation of public policies, budgets and legislation.

Girls' collective action and organising must be supported, resourced and valued, recognising and strengthening their vital and distinct role as civil society actors and powerful advocates for gender equality and girls' rights. The risks posed to girl human rights defenders and activists must be monitored, mitigated and effectively responded to.

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A 16-year-old was rejected by her family after refusing to get married (Sierra Leone).

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A young girl with a small tuft of hair on top, wearing a bright orange long-sleeved dress and patterned leggings, stands with her back to the camera. She is leaning her arms on a windowsill, looking out a window. The window is divided into two panes. Outside, there are lush green trees and a white building under a clear sky. The interior wall is a dark, textured grey.

**IF EFFECTIVELY SUPPORTED ...
GIRLS HAVE THE POTENTIAL
TO CHANGE THE WORLD —
BOTH AS THE EMPOWERED
GIRLS OF TODAY AND AS
TOMORROW'S WORKERS,
MOTHERS, ENTREPRENEURS,
MENTORS, HOUSEHOLD HEADS,
AND POLITICAL LEADERS.**



Cover photograph: Marie, 15, is an advocate against the harmful practice of FGM (Sierra Leone)
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About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

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