

# Adolescent Girls' Health

## The Reproductive and Sexual Health of Adolescent Girls in Low and Middle Income Countries

# THE FACTS

Of the 7.5 billion people living on Earth<sup>1</sup>, there are over 600 million girls aged 10 to 19; more than 500 million of them live in low and middle-income countries. Although girls constitute just under half of the world's adolescent population, little attention has been given to the specific challenges facing adolescent girls as they develop into adult members of society. Further, gender inequality persists in communities around the world, marginalizing adolescent girls and challenging their opportunities for a better present and future. Society has a responsibility to invest in adolescent girls' education, health, safety, economic security, and citizenship in order to ensure an environment where girls can exercise their rights, prosper, and help uplift their communities and nations.

### **MORE GIRLS THAN EVER ARE COMPLETING PRIMARY SCHOOL BUT SECONDARY SCHOOL COMPLETION STILL LAGS IN SPITE OF CONTRIBUTIONS TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.**

- From 2000 to 2016, the number of out-of-school girls in the world decreased from 58 million to 34 million. Most notably during this time period, the number of girls out of school in Algeria from 251,025 to 27,799.<sup>2</sup>
- Globally, six out of ten children and adolescents are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics.<sup>3</sup>
- Challenges to secondary school participation persist and are greatest in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.<sup>4</sup>
- 15 million girls of primary-school age will never have the chance to learn to read or write in primary school. Over half of these girls - 9 million - live in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>5</sup>
- In Northern Africa and Western Asia, only 85 girls for every 100 boys of lower

secondary school age attend school. Among those of upper secondary school age, only 77 of the poorest girls for every 100 of the poorest boys attend.<sup>5</sup>

- UNICEF estimates that 1 in 10 school-age girls in Africa do not attend school during menstruation. World Bank statistics highlight absences of approximately 4 days every 4 weeks.<sup>6</sup>
- 62% of girls in Kenya aged 10 to 19 were already out of school at the time of conception. A study in Chile found that being a mother reduces a girl's likelihood of attending and completing high school by between 24 and 37%.<sup>7</sup>
- Child marriage – with consequent pregnancy – is another reason girls drop out of school. A study of Francophone African countries showed that only between 5 and 10% of girls leave school – or are expelled – because of pregnancy, while most leave because of marriage or union, later becoming pregnant.<sup>7</sup>

### **ADOLESCENT GIRLS FACE A NUMBER OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CHALLENGES, INCLUDING MATERNAL DEATH, HIV, AND COMPLICATIONS WITH PREGNANCIES.**

- Girls younger than 15 years are several times more likely to die from maternal causes than women in their early 20s.<sup>8</sup>
- Adolescents aged 15–19 contribute to 11% of all births, but account for 14% of all maternal deaths globally.<sup>9</sup>
- In 2016, new HIV infections among young women aged 15-24 were 44% higher than men of the same age range.<sup>10</sup>
- Globally, only 3 in every 10 young women aged 15 to 24 have a comprehensive understanding of what HIV is and how it affects them. This lack of information on HIV prevention and consequences prevents young women from engaging in

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safer sex practices and having healthy relationships with their partners.<sup>10</sup>

- In eastern and southern Africa, young women made up 26% of new HIV infections despite only accounting for 10% of the population.<sup>11</sup>
- HIV prevalence among young women, 3.4%, in eastern and southern Africa is double that of young men, at 1.6%.<sup>12</sup>
- Complications during pregnancy and childbirth, including complications from unsafe abortion, are the leading cause of death for 15 to 19 year-old girls globally.<sup>13</sup>
- Each year, 3.9 million girls aged 15 to 19 undergo unsafe abortions. Unsafe abortion occurs primarily in countries where abortion is illegal or where there are few qualified abortion providers.<sup>14</sup>
- Stillbirths and newborn deaths are 50% higher among infants born to adolescent mothers than among those born to mothers aged 20 to 29 years.<sup>15</sup>
- It is estimated that more than 2 million young women live with untreated obstetric fistula (an abnormal opening that connects the vagina to another organ, such as the bladder, colon or rectum, which causes inability to control urine or feces) in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>16</sup>

## THE SAFETY OF GIRLS IS OF CONCERN DUE TO THEIR INCREASED RISK OF SEXUAL ASSAULT, HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES, AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING.

- Globally, one in four women experience sexual violence by an intimate partner. Up to one-third of adolescent girls report their first sexual experience as being forced.<sup>17</sup>
- In a study of 191 adolescent girls, with the average age of 16, attending an antenatal clinic in Cape Town, South Africa, 31.9% reported that force was used during their sexual initiation. When asked about the consequences of refusing sex, 77.9% of the girls said that they feared being beaten if they refused to have sex.<sup>18</sup>

- Globally, each year, about 15 million girls are married before the age of 18, most often to men much older.<sup>19</sup>
- While there has been a decline in the practice over the past 30 years, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is still very prevalent in many countries. In Mali, for example, 76% of girls aged 0 to 14 are subjected to FGM/C.<sup>20</sup>
- Son preference is apparent in many regions of the world and is particularly prevalent in Southern and Central Asia.<sup>21</sup>
- The biologically normal sex ratio at birth ranges from 106 males to 100 females. However, in China, the ratio is often as high as 130 boys to 100 girls.<sup>22</sup>
- In low and middle-income countries, 40% of girls are married before age 18, and 12% of girls are married before age 15.<sup>23</sup>
- More than 39,000 girls under 18 are married each day.<sup>24</sup>
- Out of the approximate 800,000 people trafficked across international borders annually, 80% are women or girls and 50% are minors.<sup>25</sup>
- Women and girls are usually trafficked for marriage and sexual slavery.<sup>26</sup>

## ADOLESCENT GIRLS FACE LIMITED ECONOMIC SECURITY AS THEY GROW UP DUE TO LACK OF ACCESS TO BANK SERVICES AND PROPERTY.

- In low and middle-income countries, women are 20% less likely than men to have an account at a formal financial institution. In 2014, 65% of men had an account, compared to 58% of women. Low financial literacy also challenges the ability of women to access and optimally use financial services.<sup>27</sup>
- Women living in low and middle-income countries are also 17% less likely to borrow money formally. This puts them at risk of losing significant amounts of money and potentially becoming financially reliant on other people.<sup>27</sup>
- In Uganda, the proportion of men owning land is 21% higher than the proportion of women. Traditionally, women do not have independent land rights and have

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to depend on their relationship with their husband's family.<sup>28</sup>

- In India, women are denied of all shares in the distribution of inheritance property.<sup>29</sup>
- Girls and women spend 90% of their earned income on their families, while men spend only 30-40%.<sup>30</sup>

## **LACK OF CITIZENSHIP AND LEGAL RIGHTS RESTRICT ADOLESCENT GIRLS' ABILITY TO BECOME FULL MEMBERS OF SOCIETY.**

- In a 2018 World Bank study on barriers to entrepreneurship and employment of women, 155 of the 173 economies studied were found to have at least one law impeding women's economic opportunities.<sup>31</sup>
- Despite many countries changing similar laws, several countries - Brunei, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, Somalia, and Swaziland - maintain nationality laws that do not allow mothers to confer their nationality to their children with very few, or no, exceptions. These laws create a great risk of statelessness for these women and children.<sup>32</sup>
- Children born without official birth registration often face obstacles that affect their adolescence and adulthood. In Cambodia, for example, unregistered children may not be enrolled in school until they turn 9 years old. As children learn faster and more effectively at younger ages, this gap can cause setbacks for these youth, possibly trailing into their careers.<sup>33</sup>
- In Bihar, a state in East India, 19.4% of unmarried boys aged 15 to 19 have ever participated in political activities, while only 7.2% of unmarried girls of the same age range have.<sup>34</sup>

## **THERE ARE TREMENDOUS BENEFITS TO INVESTING IN ADOLESCENT GIRLS.**

- Women could increase their income globally by up to 76% if the employment participation gap and the wage gap between women and men were closed. The global value of this change would be \$17 trillion.<sup>38</sup>
- If every girl worldwide received 12 years of quality education, lifetime earnings for women could increase by \$15 trillion

to \$30 trillion globally. Women with primary education only earn 14 percent to 19 percent more than women with no education at all, but those with secondary education earn almost twice as much.<sup>39</sup>

- Education of girls and women would decrease the rate of population growth, which is an increasing global concern. In sub-Saharan Africa, women with secondary education on average have three fewer children than those with no education at all.<sup>40</sup>
- Universal secondary education for girls could virtually eliminate child marriage and reduce the risk of early childbearing for women by 75%.<sup>39</sup>
- Ending child marriage could generate more than \$500 billion in benefits annually.<sup>41</sup>
- Investing \$9.4 billion annually to meet the need for modern contraception services would decrease maternal deaths by 25% and reduce unsafe abortions by 74%.<sup>42</sup>
- A study conducted in Colombia found that women with access to family planning as teenagers stayed in school longer and were 7% more likely to work in the formal sector. In addition, young Colombian women with access to modern contraception "experienced substantial socio-economic gains" because contraception allowed them to establish their life plans and career goals before starting a family.<sup>43</sup>

## **ADVOCATES FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS ARE MAKING PROGRESS.**

- Since 2010, an organization called She's the First has provided 3,350 full scholarships to students across 11 low-income countries to support the completion of their secondary education and encourage them to pursue higher education. They have also provided professional training, mentorship, and grants for 38,623 students globally.<sup>44</sup>
- In Nepal, the government and local organizations are collaborating in an effort to keep girls in school; girls who have dropped out of school are being offered non-formal classes for two hours a day, six days a week, nine months of the year, after which they are eligible to rejoin the formal school system. Approximately 70,000 girls have enrolled

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so far. Meanwhile, the Government of Nepal is offering small subsidies to poor parents who keep their daughters in school.<sup>45</sup>

- The Adolescent Girls Initiative – Kenya (AGI-K) is working on creating “Safe Spaces” in Kenya, sessions in which they spread important information about violence prevention, education, health, and wealth creation. They hold sessions outside schools to encourage non-school going girls to attend and contextualize the curriculum to relate to the community.<sup>46</sup>
- With the mission to encourage entrepreneurship among women living in rural areas of East Africa, the Women’s Microfinance Initiative in Africa provides business training, support groups, and small business loans to local women.<sup>47</sup>

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