

# PRIORITIES IN CHILD SURVIVAL, EDUCATION AND PROTECTION

*The gender gap in Niger schools is a major barrier to the country's development. Focusing on girls' education must be a priority.*

Only four out of 10 girls in Niger are enrolled in primary school. Just two out of 10 attend middle school. A mere three out of 100 reach high school. As adults, they will give birth, on average, to seven children, two of whom will die before the age of five. Most of them will work as much as 18 hours a day with neither social recognition nor access to decision-making processes.

School enrolment rates are gradually rising, but the gap between girls and boys has stagnated at around 20 points in favour of boys. This is due to the low status of girls in Niger's society, and shortages of government and household resources. For many parents, a girl's education does not take place at school but at

home, and it focuses on the skills she needs to become a good mother and wife. Without a change in this status, girls' rights to education and active participation in their country's development are severely curtailed. Development of the country itself is at stake.

An evolution in the status of women will happen only with strong political will, the support of the civil society and a change of attitudes. Niger's 10-year education development plan features a strategy aimed at promoting school enrolment and protecting education for girls through measures such as banning early marriages. This suggests that, with the backing of civil society, the government will take the right decisions.



## UNICEF IN ACTION

Priorities include boosting school enrolment rates, for girls in particular, with the aim of increasing the rates of gross enrolment and primary school completion by 5% a year.

UNICEF advocates action by the government and its partners to introduce a set of interventions aimed specifically at improving school access and retention for girls in around 12 communes (covering more than 600 schools) where there is a low gross enrolment rate and a wide gender gap. These interventions include providing schools with skilled teachers, basic teaching equipment, separate latrines for girls and boys, and water points. Particular attention is given to services such as health, food, school gardens, de-worming, vitamin A supplementation, nutritional education, sanitary education, and the prevention of malaria and HIV/AIDS. It requires the involvement of school boards, mothers' groups and children's cooperatives so that each time a child drops out of school, everyone sees it as a setback. The aim is to create child-friendly and girl-friendly schools. Achieving this goal requires financial support, varied and motivated human resources and time – the necessary condition for behaviour change.