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for every child

AGENDA FOR ACTION

Responding to girls' call for change in South Asia

2023

UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA)
P.O. Box 5815,
Lekhnath Marg, Kathmandu, Nepal
Tel: +977-1-4417082

Email: rosa@unicef.org
Website: www.unicef.org/rosa/

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ACRONYMS

CSO	Civic society organization
EAPR	East Asia and the Pacific Region
ECAR	Europe and Central Asia Region
ESAR	Eastern and Southern Africa Region
GDP	Gross domestic product
LACR	Latin America and the Caribbean Region
MENAR	Middle East and North Africa Region
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
NGO	Non-government organization
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SAR	South Asia Region
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
WCAR	West and Central Africa Region
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

BACKGROUND

South Asia is home to nearly one-third of the world's adolescent girls. They make up the largest ever generation of future female innovators, entrepreneurs, political leaders and advocates for meaningful social change. Investment in the 170 million adolescent girls in South Asia has the potential to harness the demographic dividend and set the region on the course of sustainable economic development.

Despite this immense potential, the region's adolescent girls face severe challenges: They are considered neither children, nor adults, and hence remain overlooked with many uncertainties. 45 per cent of all child brides live in one of eight South Asian countries. A significant proportion of these girls grow up in resource-poor settings in remote areas, urban slums and under-serviced communities. They often lack access to health services and information, are undernourished and anaemic, and are taken out of school early to marry or are denied education altogether. Their opportunities for meaningful participation and civic engagement remain limited.

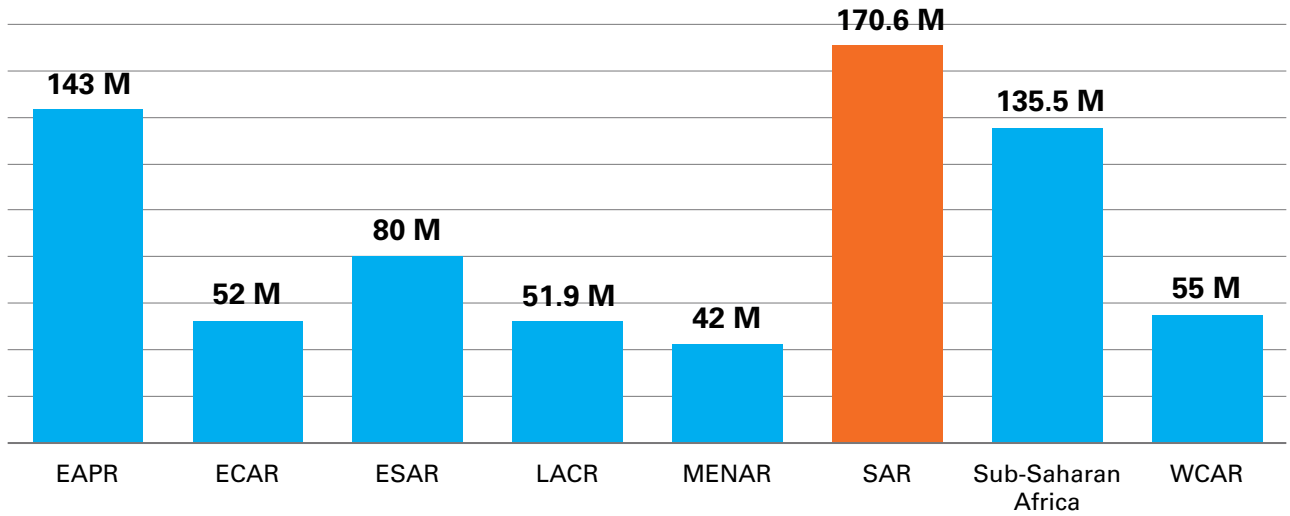
Girls are also disproportionately affected by natural disasters and economic shocks, as well as gender-unequal social norms, rules and relations that limit their opportunities, confine them in households and impose burdens of unpaid domestic work and care responsibilities on them.

UNICEF South Asia strives to ensure that the window of opportunity in the second decade of life is fully harnessed for adolescent girls. The adolescent girls' agenda is one of the seven areas of accelerated effort to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Adolescent Girls Framework for South Asia 2022–2025 sets forward an ambitious agenda for programming with and for adolescent girls and aims at reaching 25 million girls with UNICEF-supported programmes by 2025.

The framework guides UNICEF's action to leverage its comparative advantage to promote multi-sectoral, context-specific, girl-driven and rights-based programming that meets adolescent girls' diverse and overlapping needs in three priority areas: health and nutrition; learning, skills and employability, including digital literacy skills; and protection against violence, exploitation, abuse and harmful practices. Girls' voice, agency and well-being are central to this approach, and it values and promotes equal opportunities for meaningful and systematic civic participation (individually and collectively) of girls as change makers and decision-makers.

Figure 1: Population of adolescent girls by world region, 2023 estimate



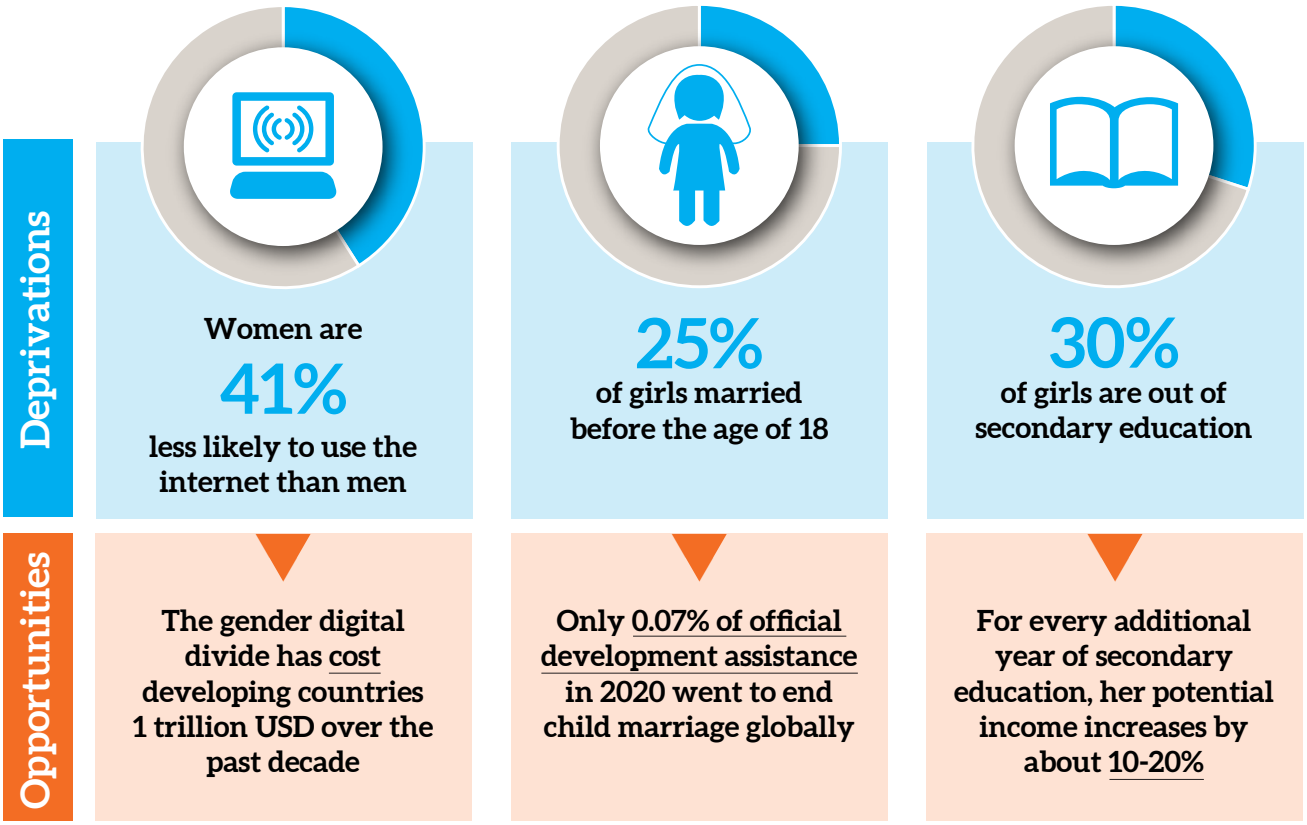
Source: Adolescent girl population – UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. 2022 Revision of World Population Prospects.

The investment case for girls

Despite the ambitious targets outlined in the regional framework, investment in adolescent girls remains limited. Programming is siloed and fragmented and marginalized girls are often unidentified or sub-optimally reached. Recognizing the urgent need for accelerated action and increased investment in girls, UNICEF South Asia convened a regional conference, bringing together government officials, parliamentarians, the private sector, non-government organizations (NGOs), women-and-girl-led civil society organizations (CSOs), and adolescent girls from across the region.

The Regional Moment of Reflection held on 9–10 October 2023 in Kathmandu shone a light on the issues preventing girls from accessing basic services, exercising leadership and having their voices and aspirations heard. This Action Agenda for Girls emerged as an outcome of the two-day strategic reflection. It consolidates intersectional voices from South Asia into actionable items, with clear strategies guiding stakeholders' renewed commitment to investing in the empowerment of adolescent girls.

Figure 2: The investment case for girls: deprivations and opportunities



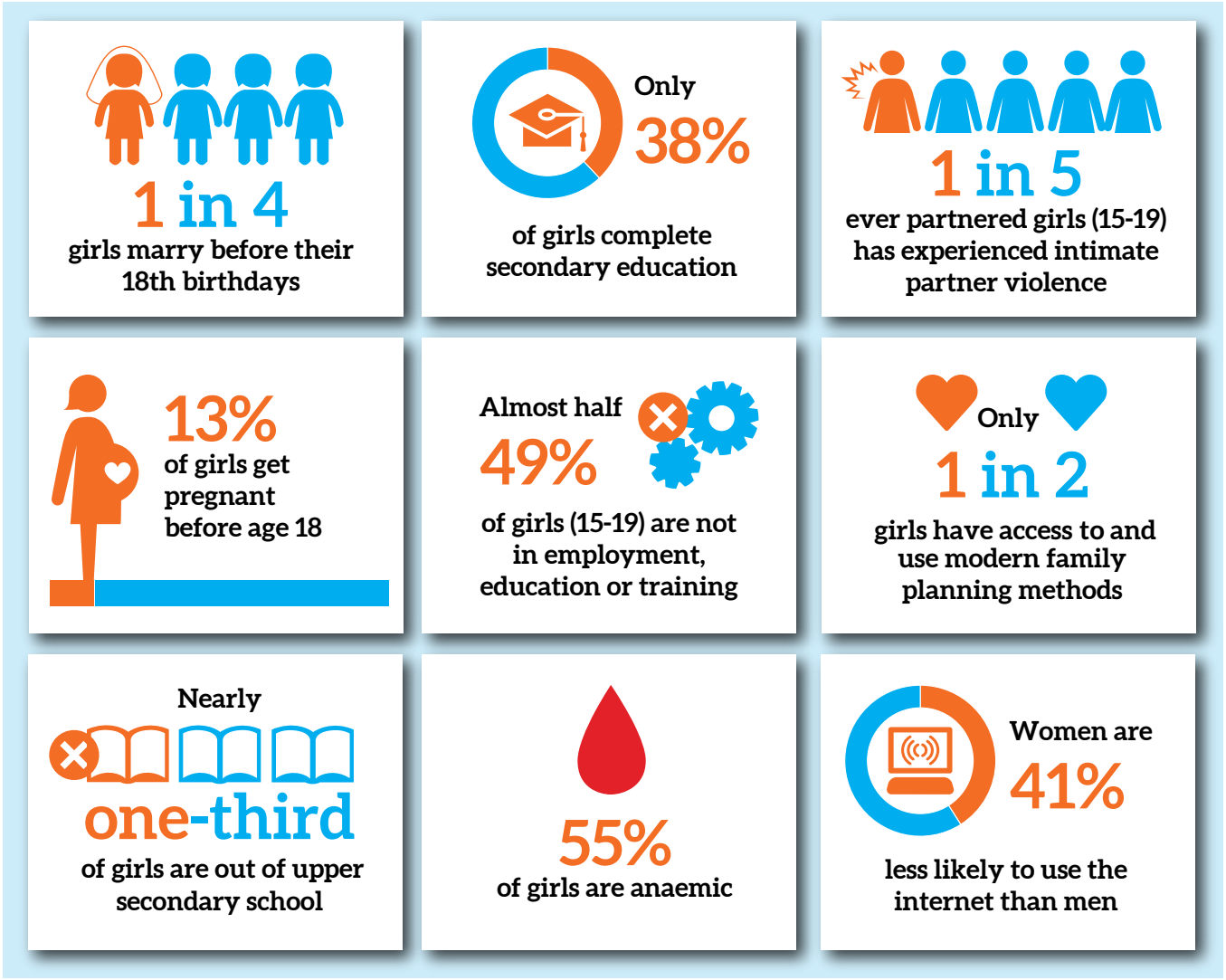
Sources: GSMA. The Mobile Gender Gap Report. 2022., UNICEF Global Databases. Child Marriage. 2023., UNICEF Global Databases. Secondary Education. Out-of-school Rates. 2022.

Reflection on progress made and challenges

Nearly one-third of the world's adolescent girls – 170 million out of a total of 600 million – call South Asia their home. Despite efforts to make their life free from violence and harmful practices, one in every four girls is married before the age of 18 – this proportion is as high as one in every two girls in Bangladesh, and one in every three in Nepal. While the region significantly reduced child marriages, South Asia is still home to 290 million child brides, comprising nearly half of the global burden. Domestic violence is widespread and the harmful gender norms and practices underpinning it, such as the acceptability of wife-beating, are also internalized by adolescent girls; 36 per cent think that a husband is justified in beating his wife under certain circumstances.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reversed many of the hard-earned gender results achieved in South Asia over the past decades. During the pandemic, girls across the region lost access to education and skilling opportunities and faced increasing rates of domestic violence and child marriage. The global polycrisis, economic downturn and the natural disasters hitting the region further strained the resources of families, resulting in a spike in early marriage. Due to the gender digital divide, girls were at a disadvantage in accessing online platforms to continue schooling during the pandemic. Girls who dropped out of school were often expected to support their families, faced increased household and child-care responsibilities, and experienced early and forced marriage and/or unintended pregnancy.

Figure 3: Key deprivations of adolescent girls in South Asia

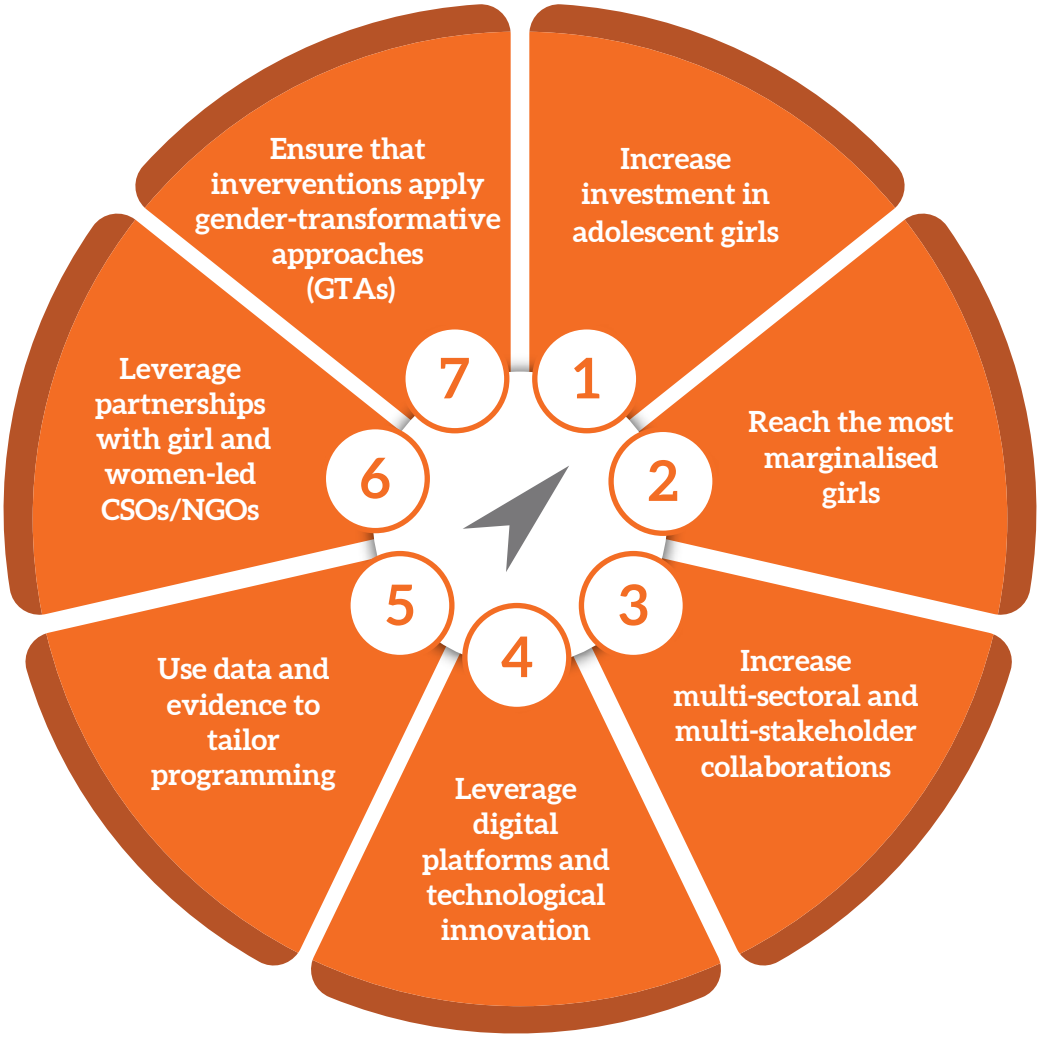


Source: UNICEF, Adolescent Girls Regional Profile: South Asia, 2023.

ACTION AREAS

Seven action areas have been identified to guide investment and accelerated action, in order to achieve results with and for adolescent girls in South Asia, by scaling up programming and improving equitability.

Figure 4: Seven action areas to guide investment for girls



ACTION AREA 1

Increase investment in adolescent girls to help countries prosper

Meaningful investment in adolescent girls has gained increasing attention and recognition in recent years. With its immense adolescent girl population, the South Asia region has immense potential to increase its economic productivity and achieve sustainable development as more skilled and educated young women enter the workforce. The agenda for action is based on evidence that investment in girls during adolescence helps them to realize their rights and potential, disrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty and deprivation, advance gender equality and contribute to economic growth. If countries ensure that all girls complete secondary school by 2030, it is estimated that their gross domestic product (GDP) could increase by an average of 10 per cent.

What does meaningful investment for girls mean?

- Ensure that girls are adequately made visible, prioritized in donor and public finance provisions, with accountability mechanisms in place in policy, legislative and administrative frameworks. This entails advocacy for increased investment in collaboration with regional and global bodies.

Investments in girls benefit everyone: families, communities and, most importantly, the girls themselves

- Focus on income and economic strengthening interventions that are designed to alleviate poverty – a major driver of deprivations affecting girls in the region – such as cash transfers, economic incentives and other forms of social assistance, vocational training and skill-development and employability programmes.

"For South Asia to truly progress, we all need to work together and ensure that every girl has an equal opportunity to thrive and rewrite her future"

Sanjay Wijesekera, Regional Director, UNICEF South Asia

- Channel investment towards providing girls, especially the most marginalized, with diverse labour-market relevant skills, knowledge about services, educational, training and career counselling opportunities, and the skills to make informed decisions about their lives.
- Support girls and their collectives to make choices related to their education, career, and other life choices, including marriage and relationships.
- Encourage girl-led innovation and entrepreneurship and provide adequate incubation support at the grassroots to turn these into viable businesses.

WHAT WORKS?

Beti Padhau Beti Bachau (Save the daughter, educate the daughter) in Nepal aims to keep girls in school and prevent child marriages by registering baby girls into the programme. The girls receive a fixed deposit of NPR 300,000 (US$ 2,582) as education insurance and a one-time premium of NPR 39,000 (US$ 335). The money is paid into an account in Prabhu Bank in the girl's name and can only be withdrawn if she has passed the grade 12 exams and/or reached the age of 20 without marrying. Over 31,000 girls are currently registered in the scheme.

ACTION AREA 2

Reach the most marginalized girls to leave no one behind

Equitable coverage in programme design and implementation is imperative to achieve gender-equal and socially equitable outcomes for all girls. South Asia has multiple layers of intersectionality, ranging from girls living in remote rural areas, urban slums, nunneries and institutional care, those who are already married, unwed mothers, disabled girls, and girls from marginalized and under-served ethnic and religious minorities. Though the most marginalized girls are systematically mapped by UNICEF country offices, individual programmes may struggle to reach them with quality packages of cross-sectoral/convergent interventions, necessitating innovative approaches to ensure optimal reach.

How can the most marginalized girls be reached?

- Conduct country-specific and contextualized gender analysis to identify, map and centre the most vulnerable and marginalized girls, with tailored programme design to address their specific and unique needs.
- Provide capacity development support and technical assistance for women/girl-led CSOs, including youth-led organizations and local networks already working with marginalized communities to enhance their presence and impact in the field.
- Improve access to essential services, education, skilling, and employment opportunities for marginalized communities. The private sector can also play a role in providing skilling, entrepreneurial and employability opportunities.
- Employ multiple strategies to reach rural and geographically remote girls, such as leveraging digital platforms and online communities, using traditional technologies such as radio and television, partnering with the private sector to expand telecoms and internet networks to remote areas and providing dedicated funding to translate programming tools and materials into local languages.
- Invest in system strengthening and advocate for increased government financing and allocated budgets for programmes focused on marginalized girls.

Ugyen from Bhutan talks about the importance of digital literacy and the challenges faced by girls living in remote mountain communities to access the internet and digital learning opportunities.

"It was my dream to study hard and further"

Jamila (name changed) from Afghanistan, who was pursuing a bachelor's degree in English before the ban on adolescent girls' education in 2021.

- Create monitoring mechanisms to ensure that the most marginalized and vulnerable adolescent girls are optimally reached with tailored and sustained programming.
- Advocate with governments to strengthen equitable policies for girls and young women, as well as the implementation of existing programmes and services, and women-led social audit of such services.

OVERLAPPING VULNERABILITIES

Discussions with NGO partners during the Regional Moment of Reflection suggest that while they are reaching married adolescent girls, this is limited to those who are continuing education even after marriage, while those who stay home remain unreached by programmes.

ACTION AREA 3

Increase multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration to meet girls' needs

Multi-sectoral programmes look at girls and their diverse needs holistically and aim to make improvements on multiple fronts. Programmes with multi-sectoral approaches and multi-stakeholder partnerships are highly effective as they aspire to meet girls' needs comprehensively and leverage existing infrastructure and collaborative synergies for maximum efficiency and minimal redundancy. However, collaboration and coordination between partners is a challenge that needs attention as most sectors operate in isolation or lack standard operating procedures aligned with other partners.

How to comprehensively meet girls' diverse needs?

- Build comprehensive programme portfolios working across multiple levels of the socio-ecological framework and engaging multiple stakeholders (parents, community and religious leaders, adolescent boys, male family members and community gatekeepers), with increased investment in community-based approaches.
- Use multiple strategies to address adolescent girls' diverse needs, for instance, safe spaces and skills building complemented by community engagement and strengthened frontline capacity.
- Advocate for decentralization, bringing programmes (in their design, implementation and evaluation phases) closer to the communities to enhance their quality and allow for agile adaptation during implementation to maximize positive impacts on girls.
- Strengthen internal and external coordination mechanisms with partner organizations and other stakeholders and align operational procedures before programme implementation to avoid unnecessary bottlenecks.
- Sustain and scale up intensive support for the empowerment of adolescent girls, particularly targeting marginalized communities and crisis-affected areas with limited service provision and connectivity.

WHAT WORKS?

The **Rupantaran** (Nepal) programme's social and financial skills package aims at empowering adolescent girls through weekly sessions by engaging **adolescent girls' groups** and **adolescent girls' circles.** This engagement with community structures has proved to be an effective way of establishing a cohesive and supportive platform in which girls create positive peer pressure to stay in school, help each other advocate with parents against child marriage and build networks.

WHAT WORKS?

The Global Programme to End Child Marriage engages in **multi-level partnerships and collaboration** with civil society organizations (e.g., Girls Not Brides), regional initiatives (e.g., Spotlight Initiative Africa Regional Programme), and with the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation, to strengthen complementarities for increased impact.

ACTION AREA 4

Leverage digital platforms and technological innovations to cost-effectively reach girls at scale

Globally, 90 per cent of jobs now have a digital component. South Asia is the fastest-growing region in the world in terms of early adoption and innovations in digital culture and economy. Yet the gap between the access enjoyed by women and girls relative to their male counterparts has widened, from 36 per cent in 2020 to 41 per cent in 2021. This means a future with fewer employment opportunities, and higher barriers to workforce participation for girls. The gender digital gap also has impacts on economic growth. Connecting 600 million girls to the internet would translate to a rise in global GDP of US$13–18 billion in three years. Ensuring girls' access to safe online space without recreating the harmful gender norms of the physical world is a powerful enabler of changing.

How to equip girls with digital skills?

- Increase girls' access to devices and connectivity by equipping them with individual or collective digital devices at safe spaces, schools, youth/adolescent spaces and community centres.

> The gender digital divide has cost developing countries **US$1 trillion** over the past decade, and is most pronounced in South Asia

- Provide girls, mentors and peer leaders with access to subsidized internet packages or zero-rating content.
- Create safe digital learning environments through comprehensive multi-sectoral approaches, address policy gaps and develop mechanisms to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in digital environments.

UNICEF Bhutan

Girls participate in the first Hackathon, organized in Bhutan.

- Integrate online safety into digital literacy workshops for girls to ensure that harmful gender norms, rules and relations of the offline world are not replicated in online spaces.

WHAT WORKS?

UNICEF Bhutan, in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Skills Development and GovTech Agency, conducted the first national **Hackathon** to inspire adolescent girls to explore the opportunities and solutions technology has to offer, and to narrow the gender gap in science, technology, engineering and mathematics education. The call for ideas received 43 ideas from 129 schools and 10 youth centres, of which seven were short-listed and competed for seed funding. The winning idea was a proposal by the girls of Buli Central School to design automatic streetlights to enhance safety on campus.

ACTION AREA 5

Use data and evidence to better tailor and contextualize programming

Data and evidence are essential for impactful, context-specific programme design and implementation and agile adaptation to changing needs. In South Asia, however, available datasets are not representative of adolescent girls due to the scarcity of sex-disaggregated and particularly age-disaggregated data. This poses a challenge to planning with and for adolescent girls. Besides quantitative data generation, it is increasingly necessary to capture qualitative information to fine-tune programming, ensure that girls' needs are correctly identified and adequately addressed, and to incorporate feedback mechanisms that help ensure continuous improvement.

How to harness data and evidence for better programming?

- Advocate for investments in national data collection/ surveys (e.g. MICS and demographic and health surveys) and establish representative datasets on a large number of indicators for planning and evaluation.
- Move beyond collecting sex-disaggregated data and ensure that data on the adolescent girl cohort (10–19 years) are available, especially in programme-relevant areas (e.g., HPV vaccination, poverty, time spent on household chores, school days missed due to menstruation, etc.).
- Invest in qualitative evidence generation (situation analysis, gender analysis, investment case, case studies) to evaluate programme effectiveness, capture and disseminate best practices and lessons learnt.
- Invest in evidence generation in areas with significant knowledge gaps and lesser-known areas concerning adolescent girls in South Asia.
- Incentivize partner organizations, national governments and regional coordination platforms (e.g., SAARC) to make data available to smaller NGOs, girl- and women-led collectives, CSOs and other UN agencies to close gaps in knowledge and experience.
- Promote girl-led data and evidence generation, for example using the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology.

U-Report is a messaging tool that empowers young people around the world to engage with and speak out on issues that matter to them. Country U-Reports are run by UNICEF and partners on the ground, including local government, NGOs and young people themselves. U-Report is available via numerous messaging, social media and SMS channels, and works on basic mobile phones. It is free, anonymous and easy to use.

DATA ON ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Adolescent Girl Country Profiles is a headquarter-level initiative to consolidate data on adolescent girls (10–19 years) across five thematic areas. This is a useful first-resort portal on which to consult country-specific data on adolescent girls.

MICS SURVEYS

The Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) are household surveys implemented by countries under a UNICEF-developed programme to provide internationally comparable, statistically rigorous data on children and women. The latest round of the MICS7 survey was launched in 2023, and Afghanistan was one of the first surveyed countries globally. While many countries conduct MICS regularly, others have outdated data repositories. For example, Bhutan conducted its most recent MICS in 2010, and Maldives in 2001.

ACTION AREA 6

Leverage participation of and partnerships with girl- and women-led organizations

To accelerate progress for adolescent girls in South Asia, there is a need to intensify and expedite efforts through enhanced regional partnerships and collaborations. Tapping into grassroots, girl-focused networks and women-led CSOs, and leveraging their well-established connections to the societies they serve, can constitute a strategic edge for UNICEF. There is also a need for seamless collaborative action between partners and stakeholders by breaking siloed approaches, improving synergies and pooling resources and expertise.

How to scale partnerships for better results for girls?

- Scale up partnerships with local feminist and adolescent/youth/women-led or girl-led collectives and CSOs to leverage their established relationships with target communities, nuanced understandings of the socioeconomic and cultural factors that impact girls' lives, infrastructure and field expertise.

Aim for long-term partnerships with local organizations to expand their reach and continue their work beyond the lifespan of a single project

- Employ movement-building approaches to collective funding, pass-through and seed funds directed towards smaller girl-led projects and programmes, and invest in mentorship and institutional capacity building to scale up reach to girls.
- Engage men and boys, as well as key community influencers such as traditional and religious leaders and other gatekeepers, to shift gender and social norms that perpetuate child marriage, including by challenging intergenerational practices, negative coping mechanisms and community pressure.

Astha, co-founder of the Shequal Foundation, a Nepali grassroots organization established by young women, reflects on her own experiences of adolescence.

- Scale up collaboration with non-traditional partners, such as telecommunication providers, technology companies and start-ups, to bring sustainable, socially embedded solutions and opportunities closer to girls.
- Strengthen and institutionalise structures and platforms for civic participation of girls, including at the local government level to influence policy and programmatic decisions and lead collective action.

CSO CAPACITIES

South Asia has a vibrant civil society, including women and girl-led, faith-based and religious, diaspora and sports-for-development organizations as well as social movements. UNICEF periodically undertakes mapping exercises as part of its situation analysis of children and women to identify CSOs working in particular thematic or geographical areas. However, given the diversity and fluidity of the civil society sector, some CSOs, especially smaller national and local organizations, struggle to become known to the United Nations, and are prevented from entering into partnerships because of their limited financial and staffing capacity which cannot cope with partnership requirements.

ACTION AREA 7

Ensure that interventions apply gender-transformative approaches

To move from reaching girls to promoting gender equality, it is essential to implement programmes that use gender-transformative approaches that address the root causes of gender inequality by dismantling harmful social and gender norms, rules and relations, and ensure long-term, forward-looking and sustainable programme design. While country offices and many partners share a clear conceptual commitment to gender-transformative approaches, alignment on design, content and implementation remains a challenge. In particular, the difference between 'reaching girls' and 'promoting gender equality' needs to be better defined and understood.

How to ensure that gender-transformative approaches are applied in programme design and implementation?

- Build comprehensive programme portfolios working across multiple levels of the socio-ecological framework and using multiple gender-transformative approaches, with increased investment in community-based approaches, to activate social capital for girls.
- Scale up capacity building for partners to systematically apply gender-transformative approaches at all levels of programming.
- Increase intentional engagement of men and boys to promote positive masculinities and invest in developing tools and methodologies to move beyond superficial engagement.
- Engage families and communities in creating an enabling environment within their communities to support adolescent girls in developing and exercising their agency.
- Build accessible systems and services that enable adolescent girls to make informed choices about their lives, health and futures through frontline capacity building, cash transfers and by transforming education systems.
- Adopt gender-transformative approaches that are demonstrated through evidence to transform structural gender norms and promote girls' agency and community accountability around the adolescent girls' agenda.

UNICEF India/2023

"I now believe that it is the right thing and will continue doing it"

says Jayesh from India, whose parents had told him that, as a man, he should not engage in domestic work.

- Build solidarity among adolescent girls and consult them about how they would like to be engaged, what barriers limit their participation and how to overcome them. Plan civic and social engagement initiatives to tackle sensitive issues (e.g.: GBV, mental health) aimed at making them more visible.

The Sathvaro programme (Gujarat, India) encourages gender equality through a focus on positive masculinities and works with men and boys as catalysts

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