

AN INVESTMENT CASE FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

Realising the rights of adolescent girls and accelerating socio-economic development

The challenge

The fastest growing region in the world, West and Central Africa is home to 54 million adolescent girls aged 10 to 19¹, with the adolescent population expected to grow by 42% by the year 2030.²

The adolescent population offers the greatest potential for unlocking social and economic development in the region. And yet, low levels of girls' education and high prevalence of child marriage and child pregnancies, fuels poverty, inequalities and deprivation across generations. The region's demographic dynamics and status of children is telling of the situation of adolescent girls across many countries:

- 42% of young women in West and Central Africa were married by the age of 18 and a staggering 29% have given birth before the age of 18 .
- 6 of 10 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage are in the region.
- Girls' access to education is the lowest worldwide, especially at the secondary level.
- The average maternal mortality ratio is 570 deaths per every 100,000 live births for 15-19 years old.
- Disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS, 62% of adolescents 15-19 living with HIV are girls.
- Nearly 1 in 3 girls have reported incidents of physical violence since the age of 15.
- Around 1 in 10 girls have experienced acts of sexual violence in their lifetime.

The multiplier effect of investing in adolescent girls in the region

Empowering adolescent girls in West and Central Africa is key to realizing their rights and potential, to advancing gender equality and to halting the intergenerational transmission of poverty, inequality and deprivation.

The merits of investing in and targeting girls are multi-fold and help to reap the demographic dividend, overcome generational poverty and reduce inequalities, leading to healthier and more educated children.³ In turn, there is greater potential and impact for community participation, meaningful livelihoods and economic growth.⁴ What happens to a girl during adolescence plays an instrumental role in her future—and that of her family, community, and country, unlocking opportunities for more equitable social and economic development.

The economic benefits of investing in adolescents far outweigh the costs. Despite what we know and the importance of investing in this growing and most promising population, the services, care and information for adolescent girls continue to be an

underdeveloped area in the region, often causing them harm and exposing them to high risks and barriers to realizing their rights and achieving their full potential. Failure to provide education to adolescent girls comes at a high cost to their health and well-being: a staggering \$15-30 trillion in lost earnings and productivity.⁵ The cost of intimate partner violence has been costed at \$4 billion alone per year and the estimated cost of global inaction is 5.2% of global GDP (Copenhagen Consensus, 2014).⁶

The solution

UNICEF's work in West and Central Africa is contributing to the growing global movement on adolescent girls and is uniquely positioned to support and advance results on gender equality and girls' empowerment in the context of the UNICEF's Key Results for Children for the region⁷, and in line with global initiatives such as Generation Unlimited⁸ and the Adolescent Girls' Empowerment Initiative⁹. The Investment Case provides an

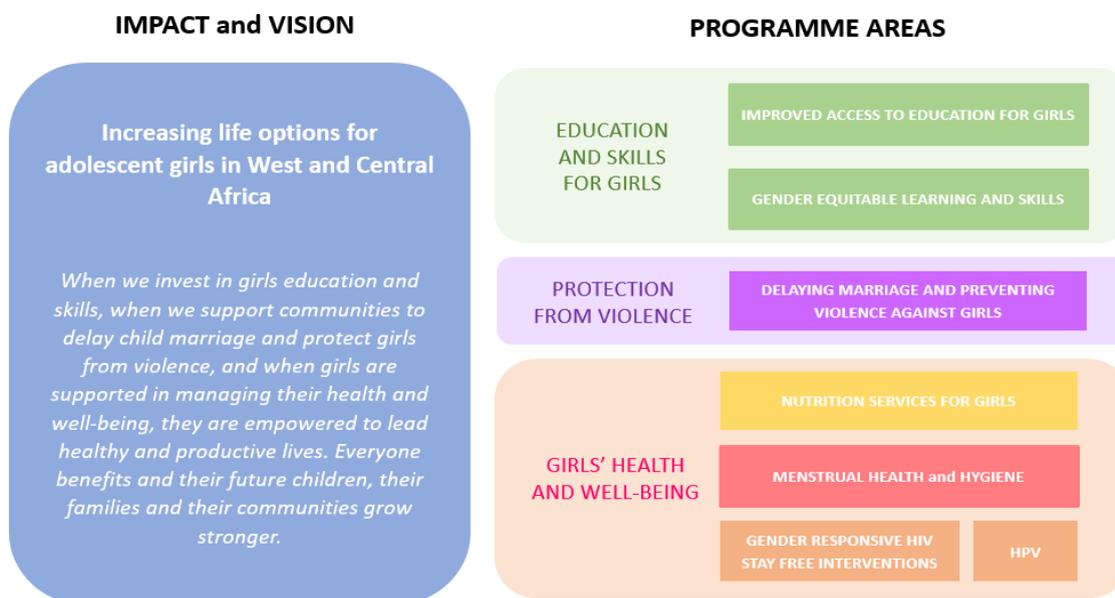
Returns on Investment

- ✓ Ending child marriage and early childbearing in West and Central Africa would reduce population growth and yield \$64 billion in annual welfare gains.
- ✓ If universal secondary education were achieved, child marriage would be virtually eliminated and the prevalence of early childbearing would be reduced by up to three fourths.
- ✓ Ending early childbearing and improving educational attainment for mothers would have important impacts on reducing child mortality (by one fifth) and malnutrition (by one third) as well as a positive impact on women's decision-making ability in the household, and would increase the likelihood that newborns will be registered at birth.

Source: Wodon et al., World Bank, 2017

advocacy and partnership platform to engage partners on adolescent girl-focused strategies and interventions in an effort to resource, co-create and support more integrated policy and programming that can empower girls and halt the intergenerational transmission of poverty, inequality and deprivation.

The aim is to maximize and increase life options for girls to delay the age of marriage and pregnancy, while strengthening education and skills-building opportunities and investing in their health and well-being.



Accelerating the agenda for adolescent girls: what we are doing

The Investment Case for Adolescent Girls leverages UNICEF expertise in education, child protection, health, WASH, HIV and nutrition and convenes the African Union (AU), Regional Economic Commissions (ECOWAS and ECCAS), governments, the UN, the private sector, civil society and communities to:

- **Make the Case for Investing in Adolescents Girls** – advocating with governments and partners for strengthened investments in adolescent girls and calling for more targeted responses in national policies.
- **Generate Data and Evidence for Scalable Solutions** – supporting partners to generate the required evidence for effective, scalable and costed solutions, to expand secondary education, provide alternatives to child marriage; and create pathways for girls’ economic empowerment and autonomy.
- **Catalyze Much Needed investments** – maximizing the value-add of partnerships, resources and innovations on gender-transformative approaches to impact the lives of adolescent girls.
- **Engage, Reach and Empower Adolescents**– strengthening and amplifying innovative, youth-led engagement platforms and solutions to drive social change.

For further information on how to support work on adolescent girls in the region, please contact:

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¹ Estimates were reported in 2015 by the UN Population Division 2015.

² Population Facts No. 2015/1, May 2015 - Youth population trends and sustainable development. UN Population Division. 2015

³ OECD. “Investing in Women and Girls: the Breakthrough Strategy for Achieving all the MDGs.” 2010.

⁴ The World Bank, “Measuring the Economic Gain of Investing in Girls”. 2011.

⁵ The World Bank, “The High Cost of Not Educating Girls”. 2018

⁶ Copenhagen Consensus, 2014

⁷ UNICEF has defined a focused agenda for children with 8 key result areas, including: 1) Immunization; 2) Prevention of Stunting; 3) Equitable and Sustainable Access to Education; 4) Improved Learning Outcomes; 5) Protection from Violence, including in humanitarian contexts; 6) Ending Child Marriage; 7) Birth registration; 8) Ending Open Defecation.

⁸ A global partnership platform to ignite and deliver change for young people across the globe, launched in 2018.

⁹ UNICEF initiative to empower and improve the lives of 600 million adolescent girls across 7 regions through a Gender Action Plan and Strategic Plan.