



‘Education *Plus*’ Initiative

FAQs/Frequently Asked Questions

1) What is the initiative about?

'Education *Plus*' is a high-level political advocacy initiative (2021-2025) for the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women and the achievement of gender equality in sub-Saharan Africa. The initiative calls for bold leadership by governments and decision-makers to rapidly scale up multi-sectoral policies, actions and smart investments to this end. 'Education *Plus*' is a response to the urgency of effectively preventing HIV among adolescent girls and young women in the region, among other avoidable threats to their survival, safety, well-being and agency that are fueled by gender inequalities and unequal power dynamics. The five -year initiative, launched at the 2021 Generation Equality Forum in Paris, is co-led by the heads of UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women.

'Education *Plus*' calls on high-level political leadership to roll out free quality secondary education for all girls and boys by 2025, through progressive increases in domestic budgets; and leverages secondary education systems as a strategic entry point for enabling access to a holistic set of interventions that every adolescent girl and young woman should be entitled to in their transitions to adulthood—what we call the 'Education *Plus*' package:

- Completion of quality secondary education
- Universal access to comprehensive sexuality education
- Fulfillment of sexual and reproductive health and rights
- Freedom from gender-based and sexual violence
- Successful school-to-work transitions and young women's economic security and empowerment.

Throughout, the initiative will:

- foster enabling policy and legal environments that protect the rights of adolescent girls and young women
- profile and support the leadership and meaningful participation of adolescent girls and young women in all their diversity
- and ensure increased investments in gender-responsive and transformative approaches to tackle harmful gender norms.

2) How is the initiative being rolled out and what are 'champion countries'?

The initiative is engaging a select number of countries in its first phase of roll-out that are poised to be frontrunners of the initiative—champion countries—those that publicly commit at the highest-levels of government to 'Education *Plus*'. Advocacy efforts driven by the UN co-leading entities will seek to enable fiscal space, expand room for public expenditures and thereby support and reinforce champion country governments' commitments and increased investments in the 'Education *Plus*' package and approach.

Partnerships at global, regional and country levels will be the lynchpin and engine of the initiative coalescing around this shared vision and advocacy 'ask'—from diverse youth, women's rights, grassroots, civil society and faith-based organizations committed to education and gender equality, to strategic policy bodies, donors, financing mechanisms and other development cooperation partners united in global solidarity.

Through our collective efforts, this rights-based, gender-centred agenda will be a game-changer—for women and girls, for the social and economic development, stability and resilience of their communities and countries, and for accelerating the achievement of African regional commitments and the SDGs.

3) Why is the initiative focused on sub-Saharan Africa?

The 'Education *Plus*' package and gender equality focus of the initiative represents what every adolescent girl, everywhere, should have access to for fulfilling their full potential, equal rights and participation in societies and economies as they become adults.

This new joint initiative addresses the gender inequities, denials, and exclusions that drive HIV acquisition among adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa, the epicentre of the global AIDS epidemic. In the region, an estimated six in seven new cases of HIV among adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 are among girls. Adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa are among the most disadvantaged in terms of secondary school completion. The region also has the highest rates of child marriage and teenage childbearing in the world.

4) What does education have to do with HIV prevention?

Completion of secondary education, an urgent concern in the COVID-19 context, is a right in and of itself and can also significantly contribute to reducing HIV among adolescent girls and young women—with drops in new cases of HIV by as much as one-third to one half in some countries. Besides reducing vulnerability to acquiring HIV, evidence confirms that girls—and their communities and countries—reap multiple social and economic benefits from their completion of secondary school: reduced likelihood of becoming child brides and teenage mothers, while increasing their prospects for securing jobs and higher incomes as adult women, and boosting national GDP, among others. At the same time, education alone is necessary but not sufficient whether to prevent HIV, gender-based violence or teenage pregnancy, or to overcome systemic gender discrimination in their societies and economies. That's where 'Education *Plus*' comes in—to address the closely inter-related needs and rights of adolescent girls and young women for their education, health, life prospects and agency.

5) How is the initiative planning to address adolescent girls and young women living with HIV, given the focus on primary prevention of HIV?

The initiative places emphasis on inclusiveness, equity and social justice. This means giving platform and opportunities for left-behind groups and communities. All those at high risk of and living with HIV are at the core of the initiative, including adolescents with drug abuse issues, young women in sex work, and transgender children and youth.

The needs, rights and participation of adolescents and young women living with HIV will be addressed in various ways, such as advancing protections of their sexual and reproductive health and rights and freedom from violence; enabling access to quality gender-responsive, youth-oriented services for HIV prevention, testing, treatment and care; and advocating for policy and institutional reforms to ensure zero discrimination, stigma and violence against children in education systems based on any grounds, including HIV status or because they belong to key populations most impacted by the HIV epidemic. The initiative prioritizes the

meaningful participation of adolescent girls and young women at high risk of and living with HIV in shaping the initiative's roll out, as well as profiling their leadership, voices and demands for their rights and accountability.

6) Are adolescent girls and young women in especially vulnerable situations, such as married girls and young mothers, those living in rural areas or in humanitarian settings, going to be included in this initiative?

Inclusiveness and social justice for left-behind groups of adolescent girls and young women is fundamental to the initiative. 'Education *Plus*' is especially important for them, as they face exacerbated risks and challenges related to education, health and agency. This includes paying attention to groups facing particularly daunting challenges, such as those living with HIV; with disabilities; poor, living in rural areas and low-income urban areas; at high risk of dropping out of school, of not making it past lower secondary education, or unlikely to return post-COVID 19; child brides, pregnant or young mothers, survivors of gender-based violence; from displaced and refugee communities; and/or facing intersecting forms of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, migrant status, in informal unregulated work, or because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Each country that commits to championing the initiative will tailor its focus on priority groups based on their specific national context.

7) How are out-of-school girls going to be addressed? There are so many girls who were not in school in sub-Saharan Africa, even before COVID-19.

The initiative's high-level political advocacy mobilization will amplify and reinforce ongoing efforts to 'build back better and more equal' in response to COVID-19 and its aftermath. It will build mutually-reinforcing synergies, including with education initiatives underway driven by the very UN entities leading 'Education *Plus*'--with a sharp focus on breaking down the poverty and gender-related barriers that keep girls out of school.

The initiative's aim of ensuring universal access to *free* quality secondary education in the champion countries is intended to radically change the scenario by 2025—so that all girls and boys, regardless of their circumstance or exclusion due to gender and other intersecting forms of discrimination, are enabled to complete secondary school. Leveraging secondary school education systems and outreach more broadly (beyond the school space, e.g., through alternative informal education, livelihoods and employability policies and programmes), also means that out-of-school girls would be enabled to access the full 'Education *Plus*' package as investments in the multi-sectoral approach are scaled up. Coupled with the engagement of financing mechanisms, donors and leading education sector partners, the initiative's advocacy is intent on filling investment gaps in the champion countries and institutionalizing sustained, predictable public budgets for the medium- and longer-term—with gender-responsiveness embedded in policies and related investments.

Targeted policy reforms will be advocated for that provide the enabling environment for universal access to secondary education, subject to each country's specific context. These may address making free secondary education compulsory for all girls and boys; instituting proactive gender-responsive policies that tackle the specific barriers girls face to go to school, re-enter, and complete their secondary education; expanding investments in access to digital skills, technology and financial literacy for adolescent girls and young women, in and out-of-

school; and promoting alternative pathways to secondary education and employment skills training for those who never made it through secondary school, received very limited years of schooling and/or a poor-quality education.

8) What about adolescent boys and young men?

Adolescent boys and young men would benefit from the initiative's ask for universal free access to quality secondary education, to comprehensive sexuality education in- and out-of-school, and to quality youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services including for HIV testing, treatment and care. All these areas of intensified investment are inclusive of all adolescent girls and boys and young people, in all their diversity. Advocacy for reforms in policies, laws and health provider practices requiring parental consent, or charging user fees for adolescents to access basic HIV and other sexual and reproductive health services, is another example of how adolescent boys would benefit.

The initiative's focus is on enabling the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women and advancing gender equality. Thus, engaging men and boys with a focus on changing harmful gender norms and masculinities, and as allies and agents of change is a cross-cutting aspect. For example, the call for investments in community-based gender-transformative interventions (e.g., proven good practices shown to reduce violence against women and girls and HIV acquisition) requires the participation of girls and boys, women and men.

9) How will the 'Education Plus' Initiative partner with adolescent girls and young women?

The initiative places emphasis on ensuring the meaningful participation and leadership of adolescent girls and young women in all their diversity, with attention to ensuring inclusiveness of those in especially excluded and in vulnerable situations. A dedicated pillar of work as well as a cross-cutting aspect of the initiative has been established to this end. Adolescent girls and young women are positioned to participate in decision-making to shape and co-create the initiative; as drivers and mobilizers of advocacy in their communities and with broader youth movements; and in monitoring and demanding accountability from the grassroots to national and global levels (*'nothing for them without them'*). Adolescent girls and young women will be enabled and supported to raise their voices for shifting the mindsets of government leaders and other decision-makers—as experts to inform policies and programmes, as change-makers in providing solutions, and as protagonists of advocacy and communications.

The co-lead UN entities and their partners will ensure safe, empowering spaces for adolescent girls' and young women's voices to be heard and for their active engagement as agents of social change. Particular attention will be paid to enabling participation and advocacy leadership by adolescent girls and young women living with HIV, among other excluded and stigmatized groups. The initiative has already welcomed its first cohort of young women leaders, and is intent on facilitating movement-building and increased public recognition and investments in organisations led by young women or organisations dedicated to advancing young women's rights.

10) How does the initiative respond to COVID-19 and its aftermath?

'Education *Plus*' represents a core empowerment package for adolescent girls and young women that is key to 'building back better' and more gender-equal in response to COVID-19. Importantly, the initiative reflects their priority demands and concerns in the context of the pandemic.

Given its high-profile, high-powered collective of actors, the roll-out of the initiative can significantly contribute to upholding the rights and resilience of adolescent girls and young women, especially given the exacerbated risks they continue to face resulting from the impacts of COVID-19. This includes the high risk for many girls in sub-Saharan Africa of never returning to school, the spikes in gender-based violence, child marriage and other harmful practices they face, and rising teenage pregnancy, maternal mortality and morbidity—in addition to intense challenges particular to those at high risk of or living with HIV. All of these are core issues of focus of the initiative, as well as advocacy to address basic needs such as food security, menstrual hygiene management and mental health. Through advocacy, mobilization of high-level political will and scaled up investments in the 'Education *Plus*' package, and by reinforcing existing efforts to ensure gender equality is central to pandemic-related responses; the initiative seeks to not only redress the harmful impacts of the pandemic on girls and young women, but also build on and build up the resilience of younger generations for future pandemics and crises.

11) Given the many existing education initiatives, what's new and different about 'Education *Plus*'?

'Education *Plus*' builds on, leverages and amplifies existing initiatives, partnerships and coalitions. This includes those on education, especially those committed to girls' education and making education systems gender-responsive, including to address the urgency of children's education in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several of these education initiatives are driven and supported by the very UN agencies co-leading this initiative, who also hold the lead mandates on education within the UN System. Leading education sector partners are being engaged in the initiative—providing additional assurances of the value-added of the initiative, which is intent and shaped to avoid any duplication.

What's new is taking the ask for gender-transformative approaches to girls' education to the highest levels of political leadership, alongside the call for multi-sectoral action and investments on the 'Education *Plus*' empowerment package. This will be achieved by bringing together the assets and reach of education sector partners, their existing efforts and investments, around a shared vision and mission involving other sectors. The initiative recognizes that an array of services and rights protections are required responsive to girls' needs that must be integrated with education—and in so doing, ensure girls' educational attainment.

12) How will the impact of this initiative be measured?

Monitoring and accountability frameworks will be developed, both at global level and in the champion countries, aligned with systems in place for measuring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

The main result expected is that by 2025, galvanized high-level political leadership and investments are in place for roll out of universal access to good-quality secondary education and the rest of the ‘Education *Plus*’ package, along with enabling transformative policies, legal and institutional reforms. Secondly, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, by 2030 impact will be achieved on improving the quality of life, educational attainment and empowerment of adolescent girls and young women, including reduced HIV incidence—through roll out and implementation of the ‘Education *Plus*’ package. An evaluation of the initiative is also planned, including to glean lessons learned and document good practices that champion and other countries can build on in their trajectories to the Agenda 2030 deadline and beyond.

13) How will governments and donors increase funding to ensure free secondary education and the ‘*plus*’ package given fiscal space constraints, especially under the COVID-19 pandemic response?

Based on evidence (and plain common sense), the ‘Education *Plus*’ investment package reflects basics of what every adolescent girl and young woman needs for successful transitions into adulthood—and what every country requires for achieving gender equality and social and economic development and prosperity, including by harnessing demographic dividends in countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

The rewards and pay-offs from investing in the ‘Education *Plus*’ multi-sectoral package and gender-transformative education are significant; countries and donors can reap huge returns on these investments in the medium-to- longer-term, which are essential for unleashing the power of women’s full social and economic empowerment and participation to catapult countries’ growth and stability.

The costs of inaction, on the other hand, are tremendous—in young lives lost; the high costs of services and ongoing care for preventable health issues such as acquiring HIV, maternal mortality and injuries resulting from pregnancy complications, and from gender-based violence; the education and economic opportunity costs of teenage pregnancy and early motherhood, and of girls never making it through at least secondary education; missed opportunities to increase women’s earnings and economic security for themselves and their families, and to reduce poverty; and so forth. Billions can be gained from investing in prevention, empowerment of adolescent girls and young women, and accelerating progress on gender equality. Donors and financiers, uniting in global solidarity for African girls and countries in the region, stand to gain by leveraging these smart investments now and reaping the returns on investments, made all the more urgent by the impacts of COVID-19 on this generation of young people. Importantly, donors can also leverage their existing investments to ensure they are gender-responsive and help make the shifts to scaling up the holistic, multi-sectoral ‘Education *Plus*’ package.

14) How is the UN going to pull off a multi-sectoral, coordinated joint effort, given tendencies to work in silos and parallel streams?

The five UN entities co-leading the ‘Education *Plus*’ Initiative—UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women—made a pledge: working together as ‘one UN’ as a foundational principle, united in the mission of upholding the rights and best interests of adolescent girls and young women, above individual institutional agendas. The United Nations can’t help make the necessary impact otherwise. It also needs to model what governments are being asked to

do: fostering investments in holistic approaches, by breaking down sectoral silos, strengthening coordination and collaboration, and ensuring synergies with partners across existing efforts and investments, at every step of the 'Education *Plus*' journey.

15) How can organizations join and contribute?

'Education *Plus*' offers an open advocacy platform for all partners and organizations who are dedicated to the rights, education and health of adolescent girls and young women and gender equality. Organizations that share the same values and vision of the initiative can support amplification of its main 'asks' through their own advocacy voice, policy access points, or by leveraging their own programmes, whether at global, regional or country levels.

You can learn more about the initiative at the [website](#) or contact us at: educationplus@unaids.org