



Every adolescent girl
in Africa completing
secondary school, safe,
strong, empowered:
time for
Education *Plus*



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A new advocacy
initiative for
adolescent girls'
education and
empowerment in sub-
Saharan Africa, backed
by an unstoppable
coalition for change led
by adolescent girls and
young women, is being
launched in 2021



WHY DOES EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT MATTER FOR GIRLS, AND FOR AFRICA?

When educated and empowered, adolescent girls are an engine of progress, transforming communities and driving sustainable economic prosperity. Yet, 18 years after Africa came together to sign the Maputo Protocol and affirmed the rights of women and girls, many adolescent girls are still shut out of vital services, including secondary education.

The COVID-19 crisis is worsening their vulnerabilities. School closures worsen gender inequality, since girls are less likely to return to school than boys. Girls are forced to enter the informal job market or shoulder unpaid care work at home, leading to increased experiences of violence, spikes in adolescent pregnancies and harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the epicentre of the AIDS epidemic, HIV continues to disproportionately impact adolescent girls. And adolescent girls and young women face discrimination fuelled by gender inequalities that compounds their vulnerabilities to HIV. Adolescent girls and young women are largely invisible, underserved and underrepresented in policies, services and investments.

Today, five in six adolescents aged between 15 and 19 years newly infected with HIV in the region are girls. More than 600 adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa are newly infected with HIV every day. AIDS-related illnesses are still the second leading cause of death among young women aged 15–24 years in the region. The majority of

adolescent girls do not have comprehensive knowledge about how to prevent transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. However, we know that enabling girls to complete their secondary education protects them against HIV and improves many other health and development outcomes. Evidence from high-prevalence countries in Africa shows that keeping girls in secondary school reduces their risk of HIV infection by half.

The lack of educational and economic opportunities that results in the diminished participation of women in the labour force is estimated to cost sub-Saharan Africa US\$ 60 billion in economic losses every year. And to young women themselves, the benefits—of a full secondary education, of social and economic empowerment and of the full enjoyment of their human rights—are priceless. The achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals hangs in the balance unless the scale and quality of investments in adolescent girls' and young women's empowerment and gender equality are radically intensified.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Africa's recovery from the COVID-19 crisis requires us to do more than go back to normal. We need a reset. As well as getting all girls back into the classrooms they were in, we need also to reach the 34 million secondary school-aged girls in sub-Saharan Africa who were being denied a full education even before COVID-19 struck.

We need to deliver proven, multisectoral, rights-based interventions to address the vulnerabilities that girls face, including HIV. To do this requires that adolescent girls complete quality secondary education. They must have universal access to comprehensive sexuality education, have their sexual and reproductive health and rights





fulfilled—including HIV prevention, testing, treatment and care—be free from gender-based and sexual violence, be able to transition from school to work and be economically secure and empowered. Only through this can the full potential of Africa's adolescent girls and young women be realized.

Achieving this will require bold domestic leadership, to make the national investments and changes required and to challenge discrimination and patriarchy, and also bold international solidarity in order to ensure that governments are not held back by fiscal constraints imposed by debt, by conditionalities or by shortages of essential aid support.

Education *Plus* will seek to bring partners together to respond to the crisis that adolescent girls and young women face in sub-Saharan Africa. Adolescent girls and young women will not be just the beneficiaries of the initiative, but empowered agents of change driving it forward.

We will work to ensure the levels of public financing required to roll out free universal access to education and health services, to end discriminatory policies, laws and practices that deny girls their right to secondary education and to leverage educational systems to advance gender equality and the empowerment of all adolescent girls and young women. We will work to reignite commitment to adolescent girls' secondary education and empowerment. Results in countries that drive the boldest progress will help to shift norms and expectations across the continent through the power of example.

WHO CAN BRING ABOUT THIS CHANGE?

Government and parliamentary leadership is key, as this is about transforming policies, practices and investments. But adolescent girls and young women themselves, empowered to demand their right to universal secondary education, will play a vital role in championing change.

We know also that change on this scale can only be brought about by coming together in a movement. Grass-roots groups, including young female activists from diverse networks of young people and feminists, have led the way in pushing for action. Now, convened by five female leaders of United Nations agencies (UNAIDS, the United Nations Children's Fund, UN Women, the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), an exceptional network of African and global leaders from civil society, business, unions, faith groups and the media are joining forces with adolescent girls and young women to generate an unstoppable momentum for transformation.

We do this not for Africa's adolescent girls and young women, but together with them. Empowered adolescent girls and young women will engage and participate in and help lead the initiative. This generation of feminist leaders can beat AIDS, achieve gender equality and secure the human rights of all girls.

We invite you all to be part of it. Let us all join forces for an Africa in which every adolescent girl is in school, safe and strong.