

## Investing in adolescent girls works: we can't afford to stop



In March, 2024, Rumble and colleagues argued that adolescent girls were not receiving the support they need to thrive, and transformative, girl-led solutions are essential not only to improve adolescent girls' lives, but also to drive sustained change for societies.<sup>1</sup> New evidence has strengthened this case, showing that investing in adolescent girls yields national-level gains across health, education, violence prevention, and economic growth. Yet, just as the evidence has grown stronger, support for adolescent girls has weakened. Overseas development assistance focused on adolescent girls was deprioritised even before the recent severe declines in foreign assistance.<sup>2</sup> Coupled with rising resistance to gender equality in many countries around the world, these funding gaps mean fewer essential services for girls and diminished support for the organisations and networks that serve them. To prevent further erosion of progress in the face of constrained resources and political polarisation, we must remain steadfast in advocating for and investing in cost-effective, evidence-based solutions that advance girls' wellbeing, rights, and leadership at scale.

The stakes are high. Globally, adolescent girls (aged 10–19 years) face urgent and intersecting risks.<sup>3</sup> They are nearly twice as likely as boys of the same age to be out of school, employment, or training and unlikely to have access to the internet, limiting their participation in digital learning and employment. With one in five girls worldwide marrying before age 18 years, they remain at high risk of violence and adolescent pregnancy. A quarter of adolescent girls have already experienced intimate partner violence. Anaemia and malnutrition remain widespread, particularly among very young (<15 years) adolescent mothers who face high risks of maternal morbidity and mortality. Analysis of World Population Prospects 2024 data suggests these pressures will only intensify as the number of adolescent girls in low-income and middle-income countries rises to 900 million by 2030.

This is not the time to retreat, especially now that valuable, new insights into what works to address these challenges are available. First, support for girls' quality education remains one of the most effective strategies for achieving positive outcomes across adolescent girls' lives.<sup>4</sup> Eliminating or reducing school-related costs

and providing meals at school can address financial barriers to girls' education. Improving the accessibility of schools and the quality of education can boost retention and learning. Advancing adolescent girls' education can contribute to their wellbeing, agency, and social connectedness, while reducing unintended pregnancy and early marriage. When paired with complementary skills, such as financial literacy, vocational training, and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics training, education yields gains in employment, earnings, and resilience. However, access alone is insufficient. To be successful and sustainable, education interventions must also deliberately address discriminatory gender biases in schools and communities.

Second, programmes have greater impact when they address structural barriers and harmful norms directly. Initiatives that engage families, teachers, and community influencers and that use culturally adapted messaging informed by girls and their communities show stronger and more sustained outcomes, such as reducing violence and child marriage, and improving health-seeking behaviours, such as testing for HIV and sexually transmitted infections.<sup>5,6</sup> Disrupting these norms means adolescents, especially girls, become engaged not as passive beneficiaries, but as active participants in programme design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.<sup>7</sup> Such power-building approaches cultivate adolescent girls' social capital, solidarity, and access to assets and enhance their agency, critical thinking, and leadership skills. These approaches do more than deliver individual outcomes—they create ripple effects that shift beliefs and behaviours at all levels.

Third, the most cost-effective interventions are context-specific, bundled, and multisectoral, building on existing platforms that address the multiple constraints faced by adolescent girls. Effective interventions start with the girl and extend outward to her family and her community, empowering her and mobilising those around her to support her to make informed choices, transition safely to adulthood, and engage productively in civic and economic life. These approaches can improve school retention and educational attainment, delay marriage and pregnancy, improve girls' use of health services, and create pathways to productive

*Lancet Child Adolesc Health*  
2025

Published Online  
November 10, 2025  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(25\)00312-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(25)00312-8)

For World Population  
Prospects 2024 data see  
<https://population.un.org/wpp/>

employment. In turn, household welfare improves and economies grow. This powerful combination of individual progress and systemic transformation makes investing in adolescent girls catalytic.

Governments and donors committed to children and women’s wellbeing, but which might be struggling with how to justify continued investments, should take note: investing in adolescent girls delivers high returns—not just for girls, but for society at large. In 2024, the World Bank<sup>8</sup> reported that such investments in Africa could unlock US\$2.4 trillion in cumulative gains for African economies. These gains could be even greater when combined with social protection, such as cash transfers and childcare.<sup>9,10</sup> The realities facing adolescent girls are stark and the challenges increasingly daunting. However, the solutions are clearer and the returns more measurable than ever. The time to act is now.

LR declares no competing interests. SP is principal and owner of Gender Equality Solutions and declares consulting fees from UNICEF to support this Comment. LC declares unpaid board membership of the AIDSImpact charity and the Parenting for Lifelong Health charity. CB is Minister of Information and Civic Education of Sierra Leone. FT is CEO of Resilio Fund.

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