



# UNICEF Gender Policy 2021-2030

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United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) established its first Gender Policy in 2010, as the global community was advancing a more progressive normative framework around gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women. In the decade since, there has been notable progress, attributable to more deliberate investments in improving the lives and well-being of girls and women. Change has not been far-reaching enough, however, and significant hurdles remain, as gender discrimination, perpetuated through laws, policies, norms, and practices, continues to restrict girls', women's and other groups' decision-making power and limit their potential. Furthermore, the global impacts of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, climate change, conflict, and other crises have highlighted how fragile gender equality gains truly are, threatening rollbacks to progress in many areas, from education and health to employment, food security, and protection from violence.

Looking towards 2030, UNICEF is issuing a new Gender Policy, which reflects current realities and the evolving gender equality landscape. Aligned to the Sustainable Development Goals and United Nations Reform, this Policy commits UNICEF to a bolder and more ambitious vision



for gender equality and the empowerment of all children, adolescents, and women. It mandates that UNICEF go beyond simply responding to the manifestations of inequality, and instead work actively to remove the underlying structural barriers – such as harmful social norms and gendered power systems – that perpetuate inequalities. This transformative, values-based approach, which simultaneously empowers disadvantaged children, adolescents and women, positions gender equality as fundamental to child rights and seeks to chart a clear path towards a more just, equitable, empathetic, and inclusive world for all. This Policy places a special emphasis on promoting the leadership and wellbeing of girls and women, recognizing that they continue to bear the brunt of multiple intersecting deprivations.

The Policy highlights the history, vision, and strategic comparative advantages of UNICEF related to gender equality and articulates the commitment of the organization to achieving its vision through strategic partnerships, amplified investments in transformative programmes and policies, and, importantly, improving the ways in which UNICEF conducts its work. This commitment is further operationalized in a **Gender Action Plan**, which describes the concrete steps UNICEF will take to centre gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women, while supporting, and even leading, the global community toward a more equitable world for all.

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# Introduction

UNICEF has long embraced and prioritized gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment not only as core principles and practices, but as essential to the realization of the human rights of all children. Gender discrimination can start even before birth and impede the realization of rights across every stage of life - through infancy, childhood and adolescence, and beyond.

As the United Nations agency mandated to protect and promote the rights and opportunities of children and adolescents – at a stage of life when gender norms are learned and solidified – UNICEF has a unique responsibility to ensure that gender equality is at the core of everything it does. These commitments and responsibilities are rooted in the Convention on the Rights of the Child



and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and were strengthened significantly in the 1990s, with the Plan of Action from the International Conference on Population and Development, the Beijing Platform for Action from the Fourth World Conference on Women and their follow-on agreements.

The first official Gender Policy of UNICEF, issued in 2010, included broad aspirations and commitments, as well as practical applications for the agency. The first UNICEF Gender Action Plan (2014-2017) furthered the Gender Policy by laying out specific guidance for programming, institutional effectiveness, and reporting on and assessing progress toward gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment. The second Gender Action Plan (2018-2021) built on growing global commitments to gender

equality – including as described in the Sustainable Development Goals – to emphasize the importance of gender equality and girls’ and women’s empowerment in all sectors and contexts where UNICEF works.

Now, with gender equality widely understood as central to the success of the Sustainable Development Goals and to the efforts of all United Nations agencies, the time has come to issue a new Gender Policy for UNICEF that reflects the lived realities of those we serve. This new Policy builds on the important foundations established through the previous Gender Action Plans and is grounded in human rights-based approaches and development system reforms. It is closely aligned to the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-SWAP) and commitments that UNICEF has made

as part of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Gender Accountability Framework and the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, among others.

UNICEF recognizes that gender norms and expectations impact all children and women, and that girls, as well as children of diverse genders, are at disproportionate risk of gender-based discrimination, rights violations, and denial of full access to resources and opportunities. A specific focus on these individuals and populations is therefore necessary to advance their rights and wellbeing, and to achieve the broader vision of a more equitable world demanded by the Sustainable Development Goals. Simultaneously, UNICEF recognizes the need to address gender holistically, including through the ways in which it intersects with other dimensions of children's and adolescents' lives. This includes addressing its linkages with race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, gender identity, and other critical factors. It also requires adopting approaches that promote positive masculinities and non-violent behaviours, and that engage boys and men in actively working to achieve a gender-equal world, where *all* will benefit.

Changes in discriminatory and harmful norms, behaviours, and power structures cannot happen overnight, but progress seen in recent decades toward increasing girls' primary educational attainment, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and reducing instances of child marriage and early unions, for example, demonstrate that such change is possible. At the same time, the escalation of harms to girls, women, and marginalized groups, as well as the disproportionate and potentially lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, point to just how fragile these gains may be, and why a commitment to structural, societal, and institutional change is necessary to sustain progress.



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## Vision: The World We Work For

**U**NICEF works for a world in which all nations, institutions, communities, families, and individuals value and care for children and adolescents of all gender identities, gender expressions, sexual orientations, and sex characteristics as equals; and where countries not only prioritize investments to promote and protect the rights of all children, adolescents, and women,

but also actively work to transform harmful gender norms; mitigate the impacts of harmful masculinities on all children and adolescents; promote equality in relationships, opportunities, and power structures; and support the development of all children, adolescents, and women to their fullest potential.

### To this end:



for a world that has eliminated and healed from the generational legacies of *discrimination* of all kinds, including on the basis of sex, age, religion, race, ethnicity, health, economic status, occupation, class, caste, citizenship, national origin, immigration status, sexual identity or orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, and urban/rural locality,

or other status, and in which intersecting effects of systems of oppression on the basis of these and other identities and characteristics no longer exist.

**WE AIM** to support meaningful and diverse partnerships with governments and others that promote children's and adolescents' ability to access their fundamental human rights, including their rights to learn, to adequate health and nutrition, to clean water and quality sanitation, to poverty, to sexual and reproductive health and rights, to fully and meaningfully participate in their communities, to influence and lead social change, and to contribute to sustainable development and healthy, green, and secure futures.

**WE STRIVE** for a world in which all children and adolescents grow up in peaceful and just societies, free from the experience or threat of violence and harmful practices in all settings, including, among others, gender-based violence, neglect, exploitation, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and violence experienced in and outside the home, and in online spaces, among others.

**WE AIM** to support parents, families, and communities to gain the resources they need to support children and adolescents through healthy and gender-equitable life course transitions, from infancy to adulthood, and to establish positive norms and social structures based on shared values of equality, justice, and human rights.

**WE STRIVE** for a world where all children and adolescents are protected, encouraged, supported, and have access to the education and information they need to understand, speak, and act on their own truths.



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**WE AIM** to close gendered divides in access to education, employment, and technology; and to ensure that all children and adolescents benefit from and drive innovations and new pathways to learning and interacting.

**WE STRIVE** for a world where all children are protected against the gendered impacts of poverty, economic discrimination, climate insecurity, water scarcity, crisis and conflict, and social exclusion throughout their lives.

**WE AIM** to create a world where children, adolescents, and adults co-create and model new and more equitable systems of power; where all children and adolescents - and especially girls - claim their equal right to wellbeing, fulfilment, and contribution to sustainable development; and where girls and women are recognized and supported as leaders, innovators, change-makers, and problem-solvers, thereby securing the foundations of civil and political liberties during their lives and through future generations.

# Added Value, Strategic and Comparative Advantage of UNICEF

**W**ith visibility, public trust, and credibility generated through 75 years of experience and achievements in close collaboration with governments and other partners; presence and operational capacity in 190 countries across the humanitarian, peace-building, and development nexus; long-standing strategic partnerships, from the grassroots to the global levels; experience in norms change, including advocating for systems-level changes, and scaling up effective and evidence-based programming; and a demonstrated capacity to work across sectors and the life course, UNICEF strives to be a leader and collaborator within the United Nations system and a model for the global community in advancing transformational change toward gender equality. We are committed to advancing this change in several key areas where we have particular strengths and added value, including the following:

## Partnerships

Recognizing the importance of diverse partnerships, UNICEF will use its unique ability to convene and engage partners at all levels to advance gender equality. In addition to national and subnational governments, UNICEF will strengthen and expand its relationships with civil society and non-governmental organizations, bilateral and multilateral partners, donors, academic and research institutions, the private sector, and the media, as well as children and adolescents, to advocate for policies and practices that support gender equality across all of its goals and maximise impact. This includes leveraging relationships with governments to advocate for transformative budgeting and dedicated financing at the country level to ensure resources are allocated toward the advancement of gender equality. It also entails expanding partnerships with, and the meaningful engagement of, girl-led, youth-led, and women-led feminist and rights-based organizations and networks.

## Adolescent girls

In close partnership with the United Nations system, including its sister agencies UN Women, the United Nations Development Programme, and the United Nations Population Fund, and through engaging adolescents and young people, UNICEF has already demonstrated a capacity to generate results at scale to promote gender equality, including advancing adolescent girls' wellbeing. UNICEF will continue to confront the persistent and interrelated inequalities that adolescent girls face and will promote the importance of investing in girls to ensure empowered future generations of women. UNICEF will also continue to invest in empowerment approaches that are girl-centred, and that intentionally create spaces for girls to lead, innovate, develop, and own solutions.



**UNICEF recognizes that gender norms and expectations impact all children and women, and that girls, as well as children of diverse genders, are at disproportionate risk of gender-based discrimination, rights violations, and denial of full access to resources and opportunities.**

## Positive gender socialization

UNICEF has a comparative advantage and mandate to support the development and expansion of positive, equitable norms during childhood and adolescence, when gender identities, norms, expressions, and discriminations are shaped, learned, and amplified. UNICEF will expand on its considerable capacity and experience in the work of social norm change by engaging parents, caregivers, community leaders, and boys and men as active partners, and allies for gender equality; and by promoting gender-equitable policies and services. Incorporating norms change into work on early childhood development and education, for example, can simultaneously increase childcare options, decrease the burden of unpaid care work which women and girls disproportionately shoulder, and expand more gender-equitable involvement of men and boys.

## Gender equality in humanitarian action

The mandate for and ongoing commitment of UNICEF to the protection and support of children and adolescents in crisis and humanitarian contexts also brings a crucial responsibility for ensuring that its work in emergency preparedness, disaster risk reduction, and crisis response is increasingly gender-transformative in its approach. Aligned to the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, UNICEF will act to address gender-based violence in emergency settings and beyond; ensure that programmes delivered in these settings are consistently informed by gender analyses, evidence and data; and prioritize the meaningful participation of girls and women.

# Institutional Transformation For Gender Equality

**U**NICEF believes that both the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all girls and women are paramount in their own right, as well as essential contributors to, and central elements of, inclusive and sustainable development and our vision of a more equitable



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world. As we endeavour to achieve this vision, we must continue our own internal transformation toward becoming a more gender-equal institution. Continued integration of gender equality across the agency and its programmes requires dedicated attention and resources to build gender capacity; to embed gender expertise; to collect and analyse data in ways that improve the understanding and tracking of gender dimensions; and to increase understanding of the importance of gender equality across all goal areas at UNICEF.

Our culture and the ways in which UNICEF works, including our processes and procedures, must exemplify the principles we envision and for which we strive.

**We thus commit to being a gender-transformative organization that invests the appropriate resources in developing the capacity of staff, and that invests in partners and programmes to deliver more gender-equitable results, as well as in organizational structures and processes that hold us accountable to our commitments.**

A gender-transformative UNICEF requires:

- ✓ Zero tolerance within our organization and amongst our partners for discrimination, sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment. This includes a responsibility to promote child safeguarding, to create and maintain an environment that prevents exploitation and abuse, and to provide timely, confidential, and effective investigation, assistance, and support to survivors;
- ✓ Ending discrimination for all as the responsibility of everyone at UNICEF, regardless of their role, title, or position, as well as the active participation of everyone at UNICEF in eliminating internalized gender bias and in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women;
- ✓ Accountability for results at the highest levels, including explicit compliance mechanisms for senior managers across the agency on gender equality priorities and results, dedicated annual reporting to the Executive Board and UN-SWAP, and mechanisms at global, regional, and country levels to oversee implementation;
- ✓ Achieving parity at all levels, including through addressing barriers to recruitment, retention, and career mobility for female staff and ensuring equal career opportunities for women, men, and persons of all genders in UNICEF;



**This Gender Policy embeds gender equality as an essential element of the mandate of UNICEF to promote the realization of equal rights for all children.**

- ✓ Allocating sufficient human and financial resources for programming, advocacy, communications, learning, and management that connect to gender results, including available and adequately funded technical expertise to guide the organization's global gender equality efforts;
- ✓ Attaining the highest level of financial accountability to meet our commitments, with ongoing monitoring to ensure that minimum standards are consistently exceeded, above and beyond benchmarks provided by the UN-SWAP;
- ✓ Working in partnership across sectors to apply

gender-equitable values and practices, both to UNICEF-led programmes and to our work with governments, other multilateral agencies, funders, and other partners;

- ✓ Establishing standards that provide sufficient support and resources to expand core gender-technical expertise, not only to provide institutional guidance, but also to support and advocate with our partners to advance in their own journeys towards gender equality;
- ✓ Continual organizational learning and growth through regularly commissioned independent evaluations of our work on gender equality, as well as investment in a robust and rigorous research agenda that informs and promotes innovative and evidence-based programming priorities, policy change, and practices, and that contributes to the global marketplace of ideas.

This Gender Policy embeds gender equality as an essential element of the mandate of UNICEF to promote the realization of equal rights for all children. In tandem with the Gender Action Plan, it provides a framework and roadmap for UNICEF to operationalize these principles to deliver real and lasting results for all children, adolescents, and women.