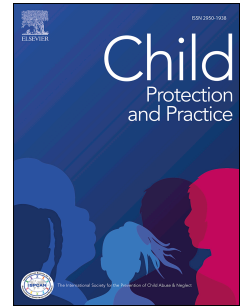# Journal Pre-proof

Early learnings from UNICEF's work to employ gender transformative approaches to advance adolescent girls' rights

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Early learnings from UNICEF's work to employ gender transformative approaches to advance adolescent girls' rights

Lauren Rumble, Suzanne Petroni, Ruth Graham Goulder

Practice Perspective article for Child Abuse and Neglect

April 3, 2024

Abstract

UNICEF policies, plans, and strategies increasingly demonstrate that gender equality and the empowerment of girls are central to the organization's mandate to advance child rights. In its newest frameworks, UNICEF has pledged to practice gender transformative approaches to achieve progress toward advancing adolescent girls' wellbeing and agency, as well as a more gender equal world. Employing such approaches requires shifting power and resources to adolescent girls and girl-led organizations and networks. This means deliberate support for girls' capacities as leaders and changemakers; understanding and confronting the gendered and age-related power dynamics and norms that impede gender equality at all levels of society and stages of life; and working with girls and their communities to create more gender equitable environments for girls' rights (Rumble et al, 2022).

UNICEF has seen some early successes, but also encountered challenges in applying these approaches. Gaps in expertise, restricted funding, and political sensitivities are just a few impediments to ensuring transformative action at scale. Yet, the potential impacts are enormous.

In this Practice Perspective Article, we share our reflections on principles UNICEF is applying, implementation challenges it is encountering, early outcomes it is capturing, and lessons it is learning in its work to employ gender-transformative approaches to further adolescent girls' rights.

Why Girls? Why Now?

While UNICEF's mandate is to advance the rights of *all* children, the organization has increasingly recognized that this mandate can only be achieved with a more explicit focus on

supporting the voices, aspirations, and rights of adolescent girls (aged 10-19).[1] In diverse

contexts around the world, and particularly in comparison to boys their age, adolescent girls are

denied the ability to make informed choices about their lives; to participate safely in learning,

skills training, and society; to engage equally in the paid workforce; to access care to manage

their health and bodily autonomy, without fear of stigma, retribution, or violence; and to enjoy

physical and economic security. Adolescent girls face high rates of unintended pregnancy,

maternal mortality, unsafe abortion, HIV infection, anaemia, anxiety and depression, and gender-

based violence. In every region in the world, adolescent girls are more likely to not be in any

form of education, employment, or training than adolescent boys – a fact sometimes obfuscated

by the relative gains made for girls in education in some regions (UNICEFb, 2022). Adolescent

girls bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, depriving them of their childhoods.

(UNICEFa, 2022). One in five girls will marry before turning eighteen, and one in five girls aged

15-19 experienced violence by a partner within the past year (UNICEFc, 2022).

To address these and other persistent challenges, UNICEF, with many partners around the world,

has initiated and led dedicated initiatives focused on adolescent girls. UNICEF also committed in

its most recent Strategic Plan, Gender Policy, Gender Action Plan, and its first ever Adolescent

Girls Programme Strategy (UNICEF a-d) to center the empowerment of girls in its work, and to

employ bold approaches to achieve a more gender equal world.

UNICEF has worked for years to advance girls' primary education and to end female genital

mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. UNICEF and partners are investing hundreds of millions

of dollars to support adolescent girls in more than 110 countries, with girls' secondary education

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[1] There is a wide diversity within this cohort, with adolescent girls distinguished by age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, stage of development, ethnic and racial background, geographic location, migratory status, abilities and disabilities, socioeconomic status, and other life circumstances and factors.

and skills development, along with protection from violence and exploitation, among high priorities for many UNICEF country offices.

UNICEF has generated sex- and age-disaggregated data and evidence on adolescent girls, expanding the range of indicators collected through the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and launching an Adolescent Data Portal and Adolescent Girl Country Profiles that feature globally comparable indicators for adolescents (UNICEFe, 2022).

This work is beginning to demonstrate the potential of approaches that aim to improve education, protection, health, nutrition, and other outcomes, while simultaneously prioritizing girls' meaningful engagement and leadership in overcoming some of the many challenges girls face.

Despite these efforts, interventions supported by UNICEF often fail to take full advantage of the organization's vast reach and potential to provide adolescent girls with the multi-layered support needed for transformative change. Further, too few programs truly tackle the underlying drivers of inequality for girls and boys. Importantly, in a global context rife with conflict, crisis, climate change, fiscal constraints, and growing resistance from patriarchal influences, governments may relegate gender equality to a lower priority. This mistaken perception that gender issues are less urgent overlooks the severe, and even life-threatening consequences inequality can have for girls.

What are Gender Transformative Approaches?

Like other international organizations in recent years, UNICEF has increasingly adopted gender transformative approaches in its work, including in programming for and with adolescent girls (Marcus et al, 2021; Picard, 2022). The organization's most recent strategic frameworks all commit to employing gender transformative approaches to enable bold progress toward a more gender equal world.

What are these approaches? Gender transformative approaches can include strategies, initiatives, actions, policies, or programsthat aim to challenge and alter rigid gender norms and imbalances of power that favor boys and men over girls, women, and people of diverse gender identities. Their explicit goal is to redress gender inequalities and redistribute power to historically marginalized, excluded, and discriminated groups based on gender.

While gender transformative approaches differ depending on context and need, they typically include the following steps:

- Conduct an intersectional gender analysis to examine the gender-based power imbalances and inequalities within a particular context. This analysis should consider factors that might amplify these inequalities, including aspects related to caste, class, ethnicity, religion, disability, and refugee or migration status.

- Design programs that work across all levels of the socio-ecological framework, from the individual and interpersonal up to community, system, and policy levels. Figure 1 demonstrates the types of programming and policies that can be employed to advance and sustain gender equitable and transformative change at scale (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2021).
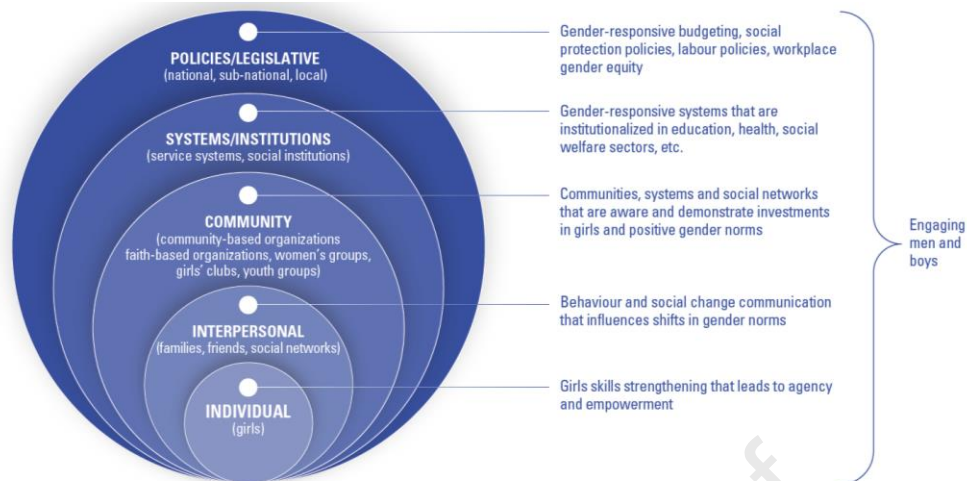
Figure 1: Gender transformative approaches and the socio-ecological framework (from the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage)

- Recognize the individual and collective agency of girls, women, and people of diverse gender identities, and ensure they are supported to influence and lead programs and policies.

- Engage community leaders, and particularly men and boys as champions of gender equality throughout the program lifecycle to mitigate risks of backlash and to address the unique, context-specific gendered biases they themselves face (Baird et al, 2021).

Gender Transformative Approaches for Adolescent Girls

By centering gender transformative approaches, UNICEF has committed – in writing and in principle – to promoting adolescent girls' agency, including by shifting resources more directly to them. This requires making girls' agency and leadership both objectives and outcomes of UNICEF's programming, as well as working with girls and their communities to create more enabling, gender equitable environments (Rumble et al, 2024). It also requires understanding and confronting the deeply rooted, gendered, and age-related power dynamics, norms, and structures that pose barriers to gender equality at all levels of society.

This is not a straightforward task for any organization. Below, we discuss some early successes UNICEF has had, as well as some lessons it has learned as it seeks to implement gender transformative approaches.

Ending child marriage. Launched in 2016, the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage has learned that, regardless of context and particular drivers of child marriage, to be successful, "programmes must have a broader focus on gender equality and adolescent girls' empowerment," and they must work across multiple fronts "to give girls viable alternatives to child marriage (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2023)." This requires long-term, sustained gender-transformative approaches and investments tailored to each context.

To help country offices and others reflect critically on their programs and plan more intentionally to foster transformative change, the Global Programme introduced to eleven of its priority countries a *Gender-Transformative Accelerator Tool* (UNFPA & UNICEF 2021). The incorporation of values clarification activities helped staff of UNICEF, UNFPA, and implementing partners understand and confront their own norms and biases, as well as to create more meaningful commitments to change at the country level.

The UNICEF Mozambique Country Office used the tool to improve their male engagement programming, fostering critical reflection about gender power dynamics and strengthening attention to positive masculinities in the program. They also reviewed their economic empowerment and entrepreneurship training tools to ensure they do not perpetuate gender stereotypes, such as by showing men as electricians and carpenters, and women as nurses and social workers.

As it moves into its third phase, covering 2024-2030, the Global Programme is prioritizing gender transformative approaches, including building evidence on what works and how to

measure it; expanding engagement with feminist movements and women- and youth-led organizations; and promoting positive masculinities.

The Global Programme's prioritization of gender transformative programming is exciting, but, as discussed later in this article, not without its challenges.

Fostering girls' skills. Skills4Girls is a newer global program dedicated to skills development for adolescent girls, and about which UNICEF is still learning. It promotes foundational, life, job-specific, digital, and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics skills for girls, whilst providing a safe environment for girls, empowering them, and assisting in their transition from learning to earning. Linking girls to mentors and peer support networks are key components.

During its initial phase (2019-2022), *Skills4Girls* experimented with various models, utilizing platforms like boot camps, schools, vocational centers, and innovation labs. It also explored different targeting methods, such as girl-only or mixed-gender approaches, and programming for different age groups. Additional activities like safe spaces, mentoring, and campaigns targeting gender stereotypes were also incorporated (Plourde et al, 2020). With the introduction of the Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy and its promotion of multi-faceted approaches, many country offices have layered on components, such as violence prevention or menstrual health and hygiene, to their programmes.

In Peru, for example, UNICEF and its partners provide digital skills training, internships, and a mentoring initiative for girls. This includes sessions focused on self-esteem, as well as support related to sexual and reproductive health and rights, mental health, and gender-based violence, and helps girls access mentors and internships in fields such as science and engineering.

In Viet Nam, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education are reforming school curricula for both girls and boys, reaching eight million adolescent girls and boys with education about gender equality and challenging gender stereotypes. Adolescents are actively engaged in the curriculum, discussing their own experiences of discrimination and how to be agents of change in their classrooms and communities. Teacher training to overcome gender biases and communicate effectively on girls' rights is also included. UNICEF and government partners are now piloting educational modules focused on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals.

There have been few evaluations or cost effectiveness studies of the different *Skills4Girls* models to date, though these are prioritized for the program's next phase. Technical reviews of some of the interventions, alongside reviews of UNICEF's broader work on innovation and skills, have, however, demonstrated some positive outputs, such as more gender equitable attitudes amongst teachers.

Amplifying girls' voices and leadership. The Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy celebrated the expansion of efforts across the organization to amplify the voices of adolescent girls globally, particularly in policy reform and civic engagement (UNICEFa, 2022). The Strategy pointed to the estimated 7.2 million adolescent girls across 125 countries who had participated in UNICEF-supported civic engagement programs in 2021 alone, such as girl-led policy advisory groups.

These initiatives underscore the importance of building the agency of girls to influence, lead, co-design, and co-produce programs and policies. Despite limited rigorous evidence of impacts on health, education, or other outcomes, UNICEF affirms that the meaningful engagement of girls is

both a fundamental right and essential in ensuring that programs and policies are relevant and appropriately designed to address underlying inequalities.

In 2023, as an extension of its ongoing efforts and commitment to fostering meaningful opportunities for the inclusion of girls and young women, UNICEF created the *Global Girl Leaders Advisory Group.* Comprised of adolescent girls and young women from over ten countries, this group collaborates with UNICEF to amplify the importance of girl-centered programming and to provide candid feedback on UNICEF's work with and for adolescent girls, for example through online surveys active in over fifty countries (UNICEFf, 2024).

"I wish for every girl to flourish and autonomy to be within our reach" (Makadidia, girl leader from Mali, 18 years)

Ensuring genuine participation – where girls' voices and needs are at the center of program and policy design, implementation, and evaluation - and allowing them to truly lead - requires time, resources, and commitment. Here, there is still work to do.

Barriers and Challenges

UNICEF's experience demonstrates that shifting from analysis and ambition to truly embracing transformative action toward gender equality is difficult. Gaps in expertise; political sensitivities and restrictive norms, including around gender and age; and bureaucratic barriers, such as restricted funding and short-term expectations of change, are just some of the barriers. We address these briefly here.

Expertise and leadership. With limited dedicated resources and an expectation of gender being mainstreamed throughout the organization, UNICEF has only a small staff

dedicated full-time to gender equality work – and even fewer to adolescent participation. Those handling gender-related responsibilities often juggle this work alongside their primary roles. They may have limited knowledge or expertise with gender transformative programming and insufficient time to prioritize gender-related tasks without compromising their primary responsibilities. They may also lack the authority or influence to encourage others with more power or resources to act. As a result, they may not be able to dedicate the effort required to drive positive and sustained change, and they may struggle to convince their colleagues to support this work. Further challenging UNICEF's efforts toward sustainability, leadership for gender equality and adolescent girl programming in country and regional offices is often dependent on individual leaders and the availability of dedicated funding.

Sensitivities and norms. Challenging deeply entrenched systems, structures, and norms around gender and age inevitably leads to tension. UNICEF staff have themselves had to confront these tensions and clarify their own values as they undertake this transformative work. It is doubly challenging for them to ensure that the partners they work with, including conservative and change-resistant governments and non-governmental organizations, are truly committed to gender equality and the changes needed to achieve it.

Advancing gender transformative programming for adolescents raises the specter of not only sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy, but also adultism. Building truly collaborative, mutually beneficial relationships with girls and young women is complicated by the power differentials of paid staff members working with young people, and the misperception of some that young people have a limited capacity to bring meaningful contributions to complex discussions, given their age and lack of a particular kind of experience. In countries and contexts with restrictive

norms around gender and age, leaders may choose to focus their efforts on what they may see as less sensitive programming.

Limited funding. Girls, young women, and the organisations they lead who are invited to collaborate with UNICEF on programs and policies may require support in navigating its unique bureaucratic processes and procedures. UNICEF's extensive size, scale, and complexity may pose challenges for effective engagement, necessitating substantial involvement and support from UNICEF staff, a capacity not readily available across the organization.

Moreover, enacting transformative change, especially concerning sensitive topics like gender norms, sexuality, marriage, decision-making, and power dynamics, demands time and requires meaningful investments. The dedicated funding that supports UNICEF's gender and adolescent girl programming has helped incentivize programming and provide practical platforms for action. But in many cases, this funding is both short-term and results-oriented, which limits the organization's potential to truly invest in and commit to systemic change. Greater and longer-term investment is needed to ensure the sustainability of efforts.

Measurement. The field currently lacks consensus on *how to measure* meaningful engagement by girls and young women, whether at the program level or in a broader context. As it implements the Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy, UNICEF is introducing new indicators related to girls' decision-making, voice, and gender norms, while also experimenting with population level measures and innovative feedback methods, such as Adolescent Girl Scorecards. The introduction and testing of these indicators and methods will enhance UNICEF's learning and contribute to the broader global evidence base in this area. Until then, however, UNICEF offices will likely be inconsistent in their reporting of progress.

"Progress won over decades is vanishing before our eyes" (Guterres, 2023)

Global anti-rights movement. Perhaps the most significant challenge to UNICEF's pursuit of a gender equitable world, where girls are able to exercise their rights, is the recent surge of anti-feminist ideologies, leaders, and organized movements. This opposition to gender equality is increasingly observable in numerous countries where UNICEF operates and in UN discussions and negotiations. This pushback against language and ideas supportive of girls' rights has stymied progress and weakened consensus (Ahmad 2022). Considering these challenges, UNICEF is increasingly restricted in its ability to fully act on its commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of girls.

Lessons Learned

As those committed to advancing gender equality and girls' rights at UNICEF continue to learn and reflect, a few important insights, which may be relevant for similar large agencies and organizations, are emerging.

Because of the challenges, gender transformative programming has often been practiced by UNICEF at small scale and/or with just some parts of the socio-ecological model. For example, many skills building programs for girls have focused on the individual level, looking at whether girls' skills acquisition has changed. Other sectors have worked to make traditional programs more transformational, tackling policy reform, such as allowing adolescent mothers to access education and benefit from childcare support.

Given the evidence and the tremendous potential for scale that UNICEF brings, the organization is well-positioned to advance work across the totality of the socio-ecological model, and certainly, to have a greater focus on systems and structures. Gender-transformative pedagogy in

and improved quality of school systems, social protection programs that advance girls' and women's access to relevant services, and well-designed interventions that shift harmful gender norms are also needed.

Truly understanding and committing to gender transformative approaches for adolescent girls requires ongoing self-reflection and values clarification. There is no course that all 17,000 UNICEF staff can take and be expected to understand and effect transformative change. A combination of robust and context-specific data and evidence, along with strong leadership and consistent dialogue at every level of the organization, is required.

The terminology used in the gender equality field is not always easily understood by others. The difference between "gender responsive" and "gender transformative," for example, is not evident for many UNICEF staff and partners, and focusing on one term versus the other may have the effect of stymieing discussions. Even as UNICEF advances transformative principles and programs, it may be necessary to shift toward language that is more easily comprehended by – and seen as less controversial to - a wider audience.

Conclusion

UNICEF has made progress in recent years in articulating bold commitments to gender equality and the empowerment of girls as central components of its mandate. Its advocacy and support for adolescent girls is demonstrating results in many countries. Girls and young women increasingly contribute their voices to shape UNICEF's policies and programs (UNICEFf, 2024), and adolescent girls hold a more prominent place on the global agenda than ever before.

But while UNICEF has seen some successes, it has also found high barriers to tackling the gendered and age-related power dynamics that hinder gender equality and girls' empowerment

across the world - and within its own organization. Insufficient funding, limited expertise,

entrenched norms, and political sensitivities are among these. Achieving lasting, sustainable

change will require steady leadership and close allyship with diverse partners, especially girls.

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Early learnings from UNICEF's work to employ gender transformative approaches to advance adolescent girls' rights

HIGHLIGHTS

- UNICEF works globally to advance adolescent girls' wellbeing and rights.

- Gender transformative approaches address the root causes of gender inequality.

- Adolescent girls are leading change for themselves and their communities.

- More research and investments are needed to evaluate effective gender transformative approaches.

Declaration of interests

☒ The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

☐ The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: