

Media Update

11 October 2023

UNITED NATIONS

SECRETARY-GENERAL MESSAGE

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL MESSAGE ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE GIRL CHILD 11 October 2023

Halfway to the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals, the world is failing girls.

On current trends, the end of child marriage is 300 years away. If nothing changes, by 2030, 110 million young women and girls who should be in classrooms, won't be. And 340 million women and girls will still endure the grinding hardships of extreme poverty.

Old forms of discrimination against girls continue and in some cases are getting worse. Girls in Afghanistan are unable to exercise their most basic rights and freedoms, confined to their homes with no hope of education or economic independence.

New forms of bias and inequality are emerging. The digital divide means many girls are excluded from the online world. Algorithms based on the experience of men and boys are digitizing and amplifying sexism.

Yet around the world, girls are fighting back – confronting sexism, combatting stereotypes and creating change, on football pitches, in schools, and in the public square. We must stand with them.

My proposal for an SDG Stimulus to get the Goals on track is gaining traction. And we must invest in girls' leadership – the theme of this year's International Day of the Girl Child – to support girls to achieve their ambitions and to boost

gender equality. When women and girls lead they can shift attitudes, create change, and advance policies and solutions that address their needs.

Women and girls can lead us to a fairer future. On this International Day of the Girl Child, let us amplify girls' voices, and recommit to working together to build a world where every girl can lead and thrive.

UNICEF

PRESS RELEASE

South Asian officials, legislators, girls and campaigners commit to advancing girls' rights

UNICEF and partners call for greater investment for 170 million adolescent girls living in South Asia, many of whom are out of school, married too young and undernourished

KATHMANDU/11 October 2023: More than 60 government officials, parliament members, adolescent girls and women and girl-led civil society organizations from eight countries came together to advance adolescent girls' rights in South Asia.

Participants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka committed to focusing on adolescent girls in policies, actions and resource allocation plans at a regional consultation organized by UNICEF in Kathmandu between 9-10 October. In response to girls' calls for change, they also developed a plan to harness the potential of millions of adolescent girls in South Asia by investing in their future.

"Far too many young girls in South Asia are forced to get married, drop out of school or are subjected to abuse. Despite the challenges, everywhere I go in this region, I see girls who are driven and determined, skilled and solution oriented," said Sanjay Wijesekera, UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia. "The message is clear: South Asia's girls want equal opportunities. And they want them now.

Together, we need to ensure that all girls in this region are not left behind. Evidence shows that when we invest in girls, we lift nations.”

South Asia is home to one-third of the world’s 600 million adolescent girls – or a staggering 170 million - yet they are undervalued, and their potential remains largely untapped. For example, 1 in every 5 girls is undernourished. More than half of adolescent girls are anaemic. Only 36 per cent of girls have completed secondary school.

In addition, South Asia accounts for nearly half of the world’s child brides. Across the region, about one-third of adolescent girls are not being educated, employed or trained. Investment in adolescent girls is low, compounded by climate change and conflicts.

To deliver on basic rights for every child, as enshrined in the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), UNICEF and government partners work together to provide adolescent girls with programmes to keep them safe, healthy and build their skills:

- In **Bangladesh**, investments targeted at girls’ education have shown to help in keeping girls in school and reducing child marriage.
- The Ministry of Education and Skills Development in **Bhutan** is focusing efforts on Science, Technology Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and digital skills for girls.
- Advika model, a government platform reaching one million adolescents in **India’s** Odisha State, both engages and empowers adolescents and their communities to prevent child marriage.
- In the **Maldives**, the Government is strengthening services for girls and women at risk of domestic violence. Girls like Zara from the Maldives are emerging as leaders in fighting against climate change.
- In **Nepal**, the Mayor’s office leads on budget allocation for girls’ flagship programmes in Lumbini Cultural Municipality.
- The Prime Minister’s Office in **Pakistan** is leading the Youth Programme Framework focusing on Empowerment, Environment, Education and Employment.

UNICEF plans to reach 25 million girls by 2025 but to do so, more commitments are needed from policy makers and partners in South Asia. To accelerate change, participants at the forum jointly agreed to:

- **Harness the potential of adolescent girls** by capitalizing on the sheer numbers and investing in them to ensure their rights and well-being.
- Governments, private sector businesses and philanthropic organizations to **commit to equitable, tailored and meaningful investments** today to allow adolescent girls to fulfil their potential.
- **Support and celebrate girls' leadership:** South Asian governments and other partners to ensure girls' rights are at the core of their policies and actions.

Evidence from [UNICEF's Investment Case for Girls](#) suggests that with adequate health and nutrition investments, the world could save more than 12 million lives, prevent more than 30 million unwanted pregnancies, and greatly reduce maternal and newborn deaths and injuries.

"No nation can get ahead if half its population is left behind. We must make bold investments to ensure that every girl in South Asia can complete their education, get better health services and live a life free of violence," added Wijesekera. "By empowering a girl to take charge of her life, we are not just empowering an individual, but an entire community."

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Browse through [country profiles](#) or data on [anemia](#) and [child marriage](#).

About UNICEF

UNICEF works in some of the world's toughest places, to reach the world's most disadvantaged children. Across 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone.

UNICEF's [Regional Office for South Asia](#) (ROSA) works with UNICEF Country Offices in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to help to save children's lives, defend their rights, and help them fulfil their potential.

For more information about UNICEF's work for children in South Asia, visit www.unicef.org/rosa and follow UNICEF ROSA on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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