

# The Reproductive and Sexual Health of Adolescent Girls in Low and Middle Income Countries

There are over 600 million girls (aged 10 to 19) in the world today; more than 500 million of them live in low and middle-income countries.<sup>1</sup> Although girls are half the youth population, little attention has been given to the specific challenges facing adolescent girls as they develop into adult members of society.<sup>2</sup> Further, gender inequality persists in communities around the world, marginalizing adolescent girls and challenging their opportunities for a better present and future. Society has a responsibility to invest in adolescent girls' education, health, safety, economic security, and citizenship in order to ensure an environment where girls can exercise their rights, prosper, and help uplift their communities and nations.

## **MORE GIRLS THAN EVER ARE COMPLETING PRIMARY SCHOOL BUT SECONDARY SCHOOL COMPLETION STILL LAGS IN SPITE OF CONTRIBUTIONS TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.**

- Out of the world's 130 million out-of-school youth, 70 percent are girls.<sup>3</sup>
- In the least developed countries, one third of young women aged 15-24 cannot read.<sup>4</sup>
- The share of girls in the total number of out-of-school children in South and West Africa fell from two-thirds in 2000 to less than one-half in 2012.<sup>5</sup>
- Progress in South and West Asia has been especially notable for girls since 2000, when nearly three in five out-of-school children were female, compared to less than one-half in 2012.<sup>5</sup>
- In some countries such as Nepal, Guatemala, and Vietnam, the percentage of poorest girls who had completed primary education was higher in 2010 than the national average in 2000. For example, in Cambodia, only 11% of the poorest girls had completed primary school in 2000, but 43% of the poorest quintile of girls had completed primary school by 2010.<sup>5</sup>
- However, secondary school completion among girls is still relatively rare in the

poorest countries of the world.<sup>23</sup> While there is considerable variation in secondary school completion across Africa, in most countries within the region, well below 50 percent of girls complete school and in some countries, the number is less than 5 percent.

## **ADOLESCENT GIRLS FACE A NUMBER OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CHALLENGES, INCLUDING MATERNAL DEATH, HIV, AND COMPLICATIONS WITH PREGNANCIES.**

- Girls (aged 15-19) account for 11 percent of all births and around 14 percent of all maternal deaths, with around 50,000 girls dying from maternal causes annually.<sup>4</sup>
- Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the second leading cause of death for 15-19 year-old girls globally, after suicide.<sup>7</sup>
- In 2013, almost 60% of all new HIV infections among young people aged 15-24 occurred among adolescent girls and young women.<sup>8</sup>
- In sub-Saharan Africa, 76 percent of the young people aged 15-24 living with HIV are female.<sup>9</sup>
- In many settings, marriage also represents an increased risk of HIV infection. A study in Kenya and Zambia found that married adolescent girls had rates of HIV that were 50% higher than those girls who were unmarried and sexually active; those elevated rates of infection were associated with more frequent intercourse, virtually no condom use, and older partners who were more likely to be HIV-positive.<sup>10</sup>

## **THE SAFETY OF GIRLS IS OF CONCERN DUE TO THEIR INCREASED RISK OF SEXUAL ASSAULT, HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES, AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING.**

- The World Health Organization estimates that some 150 million adolescent girls experience forced sex or other forms of sexual violence in a single year.<sup>11</sup>
- Adolescent girls are vulnerable to violence within marriage, including sexual violence.

# THE FACTS

# “Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the second leading cause of death for 15-19 year-old girls globally.”

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, 70 percent of girls (aged 15-19) who have ever been married reported having experienced violence at the hands of a current or former spouse.<sup>4</sup>

- More than 125 million girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting in the 29 countries in Africa and Middle East.<sup>22</sup>
- One woman dies every hour due to dowry related reasons. In 2012, there were 8,233 dowry deaths in India.<sup>13</sup>
- Of every 3 children trafficked, 2 are girls.<sup>14</sup>

## **ADOLESCENT GIRLS FACE LIMITED ECONOMIC SECURITY DUE TO LACK OF ACCESS TO BANK SERVICES AND PROPERTY.**

- Women and girls comprise half of the world's population but own only one percent of the wealth.<sup>15</sup>
- Some 75 percent of the world's women cannot get bank loans because they have unpaid or insecure jobs and are not entitled to property ownership.<sup>15</sup>
- Women produce between 60 and 80 percent of the world's agricultural product, yet they own less than 5 percent of the world's titled land.<sup>16</sup>
- When girls and young women are able to choose to delay marriage and have planned pregnancies, their per capita income and savings increase which results in national income growth.<sup>3</sup>

## **LACK OF CITIZENSHIP AND LEGAL RIGHTS RESTRICT ADOLESCENT GIRLS' ABILITY TO BECOME FULL MEMBERS OF SOCIETY.**

- Even though most countries do have birth registration laws, every year 51,000,000 children under age 5 are not registered at birth, most of whom are girls. Without the ability to gain employment and identification in these sectors, women and girls are

confined to the home and left unpaid and often invisible members of society.<sup>17</sup>

- One third of the world's girls are married before the age of 18.<sup>18</sup>
- In 146 countries, state or customary laws allow girls younger than 18 to marry with the consent of parents: in 52 countries, girls under age 15 can marry with parental consent. In contrast, 18 is the legal age for marriage without consent among males in 180 countries. The lack of gender equality in the legal age of marriage reinforces the social norm that it is acceptable for girls to marry earlier than boys.<sup>11</sup>
- One girl in 10 has a child before the age of 15 in Bangladesh, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Mozambique and Niger.<sup>11</sup>

## **THERE ARE TREMENDOUS ECONOMIC BENEFITS TO INVESTING IN ADOLESCENT GIRLS.**

- Every year of schooling increases a girl's individual earning power by 10 to 20 percent, while the return on secondary education is even higher, in the 15 to 25 percent range.<sup>3</sup>
- If all girls completed secondary school in Kenya, they would add US\$27 billion to the economy over their lifetimes.<sup>19</sup>
- Globally, estimates show that closing the gender gap in employment rates between women and men would increase the global GDP by up to 5.4 percent.<sup>20</sup>
- Investing US\$8.1 billion a year in voluntary family planning would reduce unintended pregnancies by more than 66 percent, prevent 30 percent of maternal deaths, avert 20 percent of newborn deaths, and reduce unsafe abortion by 40 percent.<sup>21</sup>

## **ADVOCATES FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS ARE MAKING PROGRESS.**

- In nine countries within Asia and Africa, a program devoted to girls' formal secondary education has enrolled over 13,500 girls in school. The program offers a number of education enhancements for girls including gender-responsive teacher training, mentoring, academic support, infrastructural support to provide safety and security, life skills, and for a small number of the neediest girls, some material support.<sup>22</sup>
- In Bangladesh, a group has incorporated microcredit into its programs for adolescent girls. The Employment and Livelihood for

Adolescents program provides a basic loan to young women ages 14-25 years. The program scaled up rapidly in 5 years to include more than 300,000 members.<sup>20</sup>

- In Nicaragua, a project seeks to empower girls aged 10-14 and reduce barriers to their sexual and reproductive health by building friendships and providing them with safe environments in which to discuss their problems. The project activities include a soap opera, and all-girls soccer team, and regular gatherings at community centers and churches for discussions among mothers, teachers, and girls themselves. An evaluation found increased knowledge of sexual and reproductive health among girls and their mothers, as well as changes in behavior in many girls.<sup>23</sup>

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# “In sub-Saharan Africa, 76 percent of the young people aged 15-24 living with HIV are female.”

## MISSION

Established in 1980 as the Center for Population Options, Advocates for Youth champions efforts to help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health. Advocates believes it can best serve the field by boldly advocating for a more positive and realistic approach to adolescent sexual health.

## OUR VISION: THE 3RS

Advocates for Youth envisions a society that views sexuality as normal and healthy and treats young people as a valuable resource.

The core values of Rights. Respect. Responsibility.® (3Rs) animate this vision:

**RIGHTS** Youth have the right to accurate and complete sexual health information, confidential reproductive and sexual health services, and a secure stake in the future.

**RESPECT** Youth deserve respect. Valuing young people means involving them in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs and policies that affect their health and well-being.

**RESPONSIBILITY** Society has the responsibility to provide young people with the tools they need to safeguard their sexual health, and young people have the responsibility to protect themselves from too-early childbearing and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.

## SOME RELATED PUBLICATIONS FROM ADVOCATES FOR YOUTH

The Sexual and Reproductive Health of Young People in Low and Middle Income Countries

The Facts: Gender Inequality and Violence Against Women and Girls Around the World

Young People Living with HIV around the World

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