



ADOLESCENTS: PROFILES IN EMPOWERMENT



“Young people are a source of creativity, energy and initiative, of dynamism and social renewal. They learn quickly and adapt readily. Given the chance to go to school and find work, they will contribute hugely to economic development and social progress. Were we to fail to give them these opportunities, at best we would be complicit in an unforgivable waste of human potential. At worst, we would be contributing to all the evils of youth without hope: loss of morale, and lives that are socially unproductive and potentially destructive – of the individuals themselves, their communities and even fragile democracies.”

‘We the Peoples’: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century, 2000

A PIONEERING INITIATIVE

‘Meeting the Development and Participation Rights of Adolescent Girls’ is a groundbreaking global pilot initiative funded by the United Nations Foundation (UNF). In accordance with the Secretary-General’s reform effort, UNF supports the goals of the United Nations and contributes resources and support to a number of development efforts.

With this initiative, UNF has gathered together a range of partners to help realize the rights of adolescent girls and boys. Implementing partners are the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The Population Council, the Commonwealth Youth Programme, the International Centre for Research on Women, and Family Care International are complementing the endeavour by sharing their expertise in reaching out to adolescents.

The project, now in its third year, is under way in 12 countries and territories: Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Jordan, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mongolia, Occupied Palestinian Territory, the Russian Federation, Sao Tome and Principe and Senegal. The activities vary from country to country, depending on local needs. Many countries expanded the programme to include adolescent boys as well as girls.

This joint report reflects the activities of individual agencies around an issue of common concern. Each agency implements the interventions described in this document in accordance with the principles and policies of its mandate.

ADOLESCENTS: TODAY'S RESOURCES, TOMORROW'S ASSETS

More than 1 billion girls and boys around the world are in their second decade of life. About 85 per cent of these young people live in developing countries.¹ Young people face enormous challenges to learn, form relationships, shape their identities and acquire the social and practical skills they need to become active and productive adults. Adults, parents, decision makers and the world community at large have a moral and legal obligation to ensure the rights of adolescents and help them develop their strengths in a supportive and safe environment.

Adolescence can be perilous, particularly for young people struggling in poverty, especially for girls. Adolescence is often the time when "the world expands for boys and contracts for girls. Boys enjoy new privileges reserved for men; girls endure new restrictions reserved for women. Boys gain autonomy, mobility, opportunity and power; girls are systematically deprived of these assets."²

Adolescent girls' enrolment in school often declines sharply due to the need for their help in the home and the costs of education. Parents often restrict their movements out of fears for their reputation and safety.

Girls' lack of power and status during adolescence is compounded by sexual issues. Many young women are unable to negotiate safe sex or assert their rights to reject unwanted sex.

Girls may have no control over whom or when they marry, or whether they want to marry at all. In some developing countries about 40 per cent of girls marry by the age of 18, often without their consent; often they marry much older men. Poor families may support the early marriage of their daughters because they regard them as an economic burden rather than a potential asset. For some parents, their daughter's marriage is seen as a way to prevent her from having premarital sex and ensure her safety and future security.

Adolescent girls are up to six times more likely to become infected with HIV than adolescent boys in some countries. Early and unwanted pregnancies are common. Approximately 70,000 adolescent girls die each year from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. Young women under the age of 18 face twice the risk of death during childbirth as women in their twenties. Many of them suffer long-term disabilities as a result of complications and/or poor health services during pregnancy and delivery.

Millions of adolescent girls, both married and unmarried, face domestic violence, rape, sexual and dowry-related abuse and exploitation, female genital mutilation/cutting and forced prostitution. It is estimated, for example, that 4 million women and girls worldwide are sold into marriage, slavery or prostitution. Half of all victims of sexual abuse are under the age of 15.

All young people have the right to:

- policies and programmes that promote their survival and personal development, including health care, education, life and livelihood skills and vocational training
- the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health

¹ The World Health Organization defines adolescents as people between the ages of 10 to 19 years of age. Young people are commonly defined as those between the ages of 10 to 24. Youth are defined as those between 15 and 24 years of age, depending on the country context. To avoid repetition in this publication, the terms 'adolescents' and 'young people' are used interchangeably to refer to people aged between 10 and 19.

² B.S. Mensch, J. Bruce, and M.E. Greene, *The Uncharted Passage: Girls' Adolescence in the Developing World*, Population Council, New York, 1998.

- protection against violence, discrimination and exploitation
- participate in matters that affect their lives and freely express their viewpoints.

These rights have been set out in:

- the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989
- the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979
- the Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 and in the key outcome document issued at ICPD+5 in 1999
- the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, and the Political Declaration and outcome document from Beijing+5 in 2000.

Respecting these rights will enable all adolescents, boys as well as girls, to grow and develop to their full potential. The existing gender bias that skews societies and entrenches inequalities and poverty can be ended, giving girls the freedom to be active and equal partners in development.

FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) emanating from the Millennium Summit of the United Nations form a framework for the United Nations system to work together. A number of issues affecting adolescents are central to the MDGs: completion of primary schooling, elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education, halting the spread of HIV/AIDS, reducing the

maternal mortality ratio, and implementing strategies for decent and productive work for youth.

The initiative entitled 'Meeting the Development and Participation Rights of Adolescent Girls' puts 'adolescence' at the forefront of the development agenda of the three implementing UN organizations. Through this initiative adolescent participation is being institutionalized and adolescent issues and rights are being mainstreamed. Best practices and lessons learned are being incorporated into the policy framework. Indicators for measurement are being developed beyond health and education. The realities of girls' lives are being seen more clearly and strategies are more articulate at the country and regional levels. Protective environments for adolescents' health and development are being created and strengthened.

At the country level, the MDGs are supplemented by other developmental frameworks such as poverty reduction strategies, sector-wide approaches and health sector reforms. For the United Nations system, the Common Country Assessments and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework are key instruments. The challenge is to ensure that the concerns of adolescents are mainstreamed within these frameworks so that the goals spelled out in the MDGs are fully achieved.

At the national level, this initiative has been instrumental in making the voices of adolescents heard. The long-term success of the project, however, will depend on how these voices continue to reverberate and influence larger developmental goals.

Following are some experiences that demonstrate the project's impact to date.

BANGLADESH

REACHING OUT TO RURAL ADOLESCENT GIRLS

In Bangladesh, nearly half of adolescent girls are married by the age of 15 and more than half of these become mothers by the time they are 19. Surveys show that early marriage, lack of knowledge about reproductive health and illiteracy are common among adolescents.

UNICEF and UNFPA, under the umbrella of 'Meeting the Development and Participation Rights of Adolescent Girls' joined together to address the problem.

An assessment study entitled 'Situation of Adolescent Girls in Bangladesh' provided essential information about the family, community and social and economic aspects of the girls' lives. And a similar study on adolescent boys has also been completed.

UNICEF works with unmarried adolescent girls to encourage them to delay early marriage and to empower the girls to participate in the social and economic decisions that affect them. UNFPA is working to inform married adolescents about their rights and to sensitize parents, community leaders and health care providers about the reproductive health needs of adolescents. Both agencies operate in the same geographical regions of rural Bangladesh and use complementary approaches.

UNICEF's pilot intervention Kishori Abhijan represents a pioneering effort to empower adolescents. The initiative encourages adolescent leadership and role models, and fosters gender equality and peer-to-peer education. Supported by UNICEF since 2001, it is being implemented in partnership with the Government of Bangladesh and non-governmental organization partners, including BRAC, the Centre for Mass Education in Science (CMES) and the Population Council. UNICEF is assisting the government, families and communities in providing adolescents access to better education, information about their health and well-being, and opportunities to gain life and livelihood skills.

Under the scheme, girls are active partners and participate in non-traditional livelihood skills programmes like journalism and photography that enhance their confidence and visibility in the community.

Life skills-based education uses participatory approaches to teach critical thinking, negotiation and decision-making, in addition to health, social, business and other information. The training has opened up new roles for the girls in their communities. "My parents arranged for my brother to marry a 15-year-old girl but I convinced my parents that this was wrong and they called off the wedding," said one adolescent girl.

UNICEF and UNFPA
are working with the
Bangladesh
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encourage adolescent
leadership and foster
gender equality.

Another adolescent leader said, "My uncle blamed my aunt as she had given birth to a girl, and [so] he decided to take another wife. I explained to my aunt that the sex of children is determined by the father and not by the mother. When she, in turn, explained this to my uncle, he got very upset.... When he was shown my book, he accepted what was written and decided not to remarry."

Adolescent girls' mobility is usually very restricted, but four adolescent girls went to Rawalpindi, Pakistan, to participate in a South Asia Girl Child Symposium. After returning, Nasrin Akhter, a member of CMES Chapainawabganj said, "Five journalists came to my house to ask me what I did there and what I saw. More importantly, when I told my parents...what things I saw and how we were looked after, my mother said, 'Today there is no difference between my son and my daughter'."

"IF I HAD [HAD] THE INFORMATION BEFOREHAND MY MARRIAGE WOULD HAVE BEEN DELAYED FOR AT LEAST TWO YEARS AND I COULD HAVE CONTINUED MY SCHOOLING. NOW I AM SURE THE SAME WILL NOT HAPPEN TO MY SISTER."

Rashida, a married adolescent girl

A young female participant in a 15-day journalism training course said, "My father was nervous about me travelling far to attend this course. So we both spoke to the BRAC manager, who



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assured my father that I would be treated like his own daughter there. My father then agreed. I went to the training and had no problems. Since then, I have been allowed to go to more courses."

UNFPA, as a member of the Adolescent Reproductive Health Working Group, is working closely with the government and developmental agencies, policy makers and NGO representatives, to heighten adolescents' awareness about reproductive health rights through adolescent-friendly health services.

Baseline surveys facilitated by UNFPA have been used to design innovative approaches to the health needs of married adolescent girls. As part of the adolescent awareness campaign, reader-friendly booklets on marriage and family health, HIV/AIDS and relationships have been published and distributed to adolescents through youth club networks.

During pre-testing of the booklets, Rashida, a married adolescent girl, said "If I had [had] the information beforehand, my marriage would have been delayed for at least two years and I could have continued my schooling. Now I am sure the same will not happen to my sister."

Nearly 300 young people are learning multimedia skills—videography, TV production, radio broadcasting, photography, print journalism and website development—at the Multi-Media Centre in Cotonou.



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BENIN CREATING A CULTURE OF MUTUAL RESPECT

Adolescents in Benin account for 31 per cent of the population. They are faced with daunting challenges, as are their peers in most West African nations. Girls are the most vulnerable. They are impoverished and poorly educated, and only 34 per cent attend school between the ages of 6 and 11. Many girls marry and become mothers by the age of 19. Maternal mortality is very high: 498 for every 100,000 births. Between 40 per cent and 50 per cent of girls are forced to go through female

The overall target is to reach 200,000 adolescent girls, both married and single, by the end of 2004 through Youth and Leisure Centers that provide quality health information and reproductive health services, non-formal education, including literacy programmes, and opportunities for cultural and artistic expression.

UNFPA initiated a national pilot programme to tackle youth health issues through the youth cen

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