



The Berhane Programme, Ethiopia, which provides economic and other incentives for girls to stay in school. © UNFPA/Mark Tuschman

## Girls and Education

When girls are healthy and safe they can attend school to gain the skills and confidence they need to grow into empowered adults. Educating girls is a catalyst for community, economic and social development.

Educating girls enables sustainable development. To fully realise the potential of education to do this, education provision must be rights-based and include evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education. When this is provided, girls are able to realise their full potential. They become empowered to claim their rights and to participate in all aspects of economic, social and cultural life. This results in a multitude of positive outcomes for girls and women themselves and for whole communities and societies.

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On Sexual and Reproductive Health  
and Rights and Development

### BENEFITS OF GIRLS' EDUCATION FOR DEVELOPMENT:

- » **Girls have more choices.** Girls who are educated have more choices about work, relationships, sexuality and health. They also tend to marry later and delay pregnancy, which in turn results in reduced risk during pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>1</sup>
- » **Girls' vulnerability is reduced.** Girls who receive quality education, including comprehensive sexuality education, are more informed and better equipped to negotiate safe sex. They are less vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, sexual exploitation and trafficking.<sup>2</sup> The age of sexual debut can be delayed and the likelihood that contraception will be used increased.<sup>3</sup>
- » **Infant mortality is reduced.** Each extra year of a mother's schooling reduces the probability of infant mortality by 5-10%.
- » **The health of children is improved.** A child born to a mother who can read is 50% more likely to survive past the age of five. Children of educated mothers are more likely to be vaccinated and less likely to experience malnourishment.<sup>4</sup>

Facilitating girls' choices empowers them to become agents of change. This is vital to achieving global development objectives, including eradicating HIV/AIDS and breaking cycles of poverty.

### HOW CAN THIS BE ACHIEVED?

- » **Tackle gender stereotyping.** Prevailing social norms can lead parents to discount the value of girls' education and choose to invest in the education of boys.<sup>5</sup>
- » **Address economic inequality.** Economic hardship increases the likelihood that children will be forced into marriage or child labour and kept out of school.<sup>6</sup>
- » **Eradicate child marriage and early pregnancy.** In the developing world, about 19% of girls become pregnant before 18,<sup>7</sup> and about one-third of girls are married.<sup>8</sup> The regions with the highest rates of child marriage also have the poorest gender parity in education. When girls become pregnant, their return to education must also be facilitated.

- » **End gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation (FGM).** 150 million girls under 18 have experienced rape or other forms of sexual violence. Fear of sexual violence from other pupils and even from teachers prevents girls from attending school and makes their parents more likely to remove them from school early.<sup>9</sup>
  - » **Improve access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.** Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including age appropriate sexuality education, must be part of strategies to keep girls in education for longer.<sup>10</sup> Despite the proven benefits, comprehensive sexuality education is still not provided in most countries.<sup>11</sup>
  - » **Provide quality sanitary facilities.** Lack of quality menstrual hygiene and sanitation facilities can affect girls' school attendance.<sup>12</sup>
  - » **Employ more female teachers.** Women teachers can act as role models for girls. The number of women teachers in schools is positively correlated with girls' school enrolment, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>13</sup>
  - » **Monitor all aspects of progress.** Indicators for success of education initiatives should not only include numbers such as enrolment figures, but also information on completion, educational quality and learning outcomes.<sup>14</sup>
- » **Goal 4 on Education** requires that all learners must be provided with the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development, including education relating to human rights and gender equality (target 4.7).
  - » **Goal 5 on Gender Equality** requires the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls; the elimination of harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation; and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights (targets 5.2, 5.3 and 5.6, respectively).

## WHAT CAN THE IRISH GOVERNMENT DO?

Ireland can support the realisation of girls' human rights in a number of ways:

- » Develop policies and support programmes that treat sexual and reproductive health and rights and girls' education as mutually reinforcing strategies to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment.
- » Support programmes and initiatives that improve the delivery of comprehensive and evidence-based sexuality education in primary and secondary schools.
- » Support programmes and initiatives aimed at ensuring that girls can stay in education and access it safely. This includes measures such as providing menstrual hygiene facilities in schools, working against child marriage and addressing violence and harassment in and around schools.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, consists of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the world's governments have committed to achieving by 2030. The Goals indicate that sustainable development is possible only when sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) have been realised.

- » **Goal 3 on Health** requires universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services, including family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes (target 3.7).

"Comprehensive sexuality education enables young people to make informed decisions about their sexuality and health. These programmes build life skills and increase responsible behaviours, and because they are based on human rights principles, they help advance human rights, gender equality and the empowerment of young people."<sup>15</sup> – United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

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13. UNESCO (2006). The impact of women teachers on girls' education: Advocacy brief.
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The Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) acts as the secretariat to the All Party Oireachtas Interest Group on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Development.

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