Side Event Concept Note for the 65th Commission on the Status of Women

Agency and empowerment for adolescent girls beyond Covid-19

13:00 to 14:00 GMT  March 11th, 2021
Online

Organizers:
The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) consortium, ODI and UNICEF

Synopsis:
As national governments roll out COVID response plans, an opportunity arises to re-cast adolescent girls’ programs to centrally anchor them on girls’ voices, leadership, ambitions and assets in development policies and programs. Drawing together the evidence on what we know works for adolescent girls, as well as learning from practice examples, this panel will explore a girl-intentional approach to policy and programming. Bringing together global thought leaders, policy and programming experts, this event will highlight the role of policy, programming and evidence generation in advancing adolescent girls’ and boys’ capabilities now and strengthen opportunities for empowerment as they transition into early adulthood, as well as tackle life-course and inter-generational cycles of poverty and gender inequalities. Central to the conversation is girl’s effective participation, voice and agency in challenging existing norms and effecting positive transformation addressing particular “social norms around gender, power, violence, and attitudes and values around gender roles”.

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1 The key theme of the 65th Commission on the Status of Women is Women’s full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls
2 A girl-intentional approach places the girl at the center of programs or policies that are designed to respond to her aspirations and realities, and that both promote and recognize her empowerment and agency as valued contributions. For more information see “A Bolder Vision for Adolescent Girls” UNICEF Background paper on Gender Action Plan, January 2021
3 Aruri (2020) background paper for CSW 2021. Advancing youth participation to achieve gender transformative change
Background and Motivation

There are 600 million adolescent girls (aged 10 to 19 years) in the world today; with almost 90 per cent living in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs)\(^4\) Despite ongoing disadvantage, discrimination, and widespread neglect of their rights, today more than ever in history, girls are emerging as leading voices in social change movements, taking charge and leading change in communities all over the world. To recognize this agency, secure their rights, and support them to reach their full potential – matched with rising aspirations for their lives – the global community must step up investment in adolescent girls’ empowerment and well-being as they transition through adolescence into adulthood.

Over the last two decades there has been increasing international attention on adolescence as a critical window of opportunity to fast-track social change and achieve progress across the sustainable development goals. Historically, public sector strategies for adolescents have tended to focus on protection from problems and responding to them when they occurred\(^5\) (Camilletti and Banati 2018), with limited participation and feedback from young people themselves. In recent years, several UN agencies and development partners have advocated for approaches that redress this imbalance by placing emphasis on the competencies, assets and agency of adolescents, with dedicated strategies to reach and support adolescent girls.

However, challenges to scaling up these approaches include the lack of available quality services, especially in low- and middle-income settings. Weak systems are coupled with limited integration. There remain many one-off interventions without enduring impacts. There is a lack of national capacity to implement gender transformative programs even in high income countries, and these rarely operate at scale. Economic barriers including transport costs hamper access to services, including education. Girls remain underprioritized in national frameworks and budgets, particularly with respect to issues like gender-based violence and mental health (Woldeyesus et al., 2018). Hampering improvements, there remains insufficient alignment between program interventions and robust evidence collection for learning and adaptive management.


\(^5\) The need for a delicate balance is particularly evident in setting minimum ages where the science of young people’s evolving capacities makes clear that inappropriate application can compromise protection and jeopardize adolescents’ agency and choice (Camilletti, 2018). For example, some researchers have argued that laws that promote a high age of sexual consent are frequently used to curb adolescents’ and women’s agency, resulting in stigmatization and criminalization (Petroni, Das and Sawyer, 2019).
Furthermore, at the community level there is a need to address the gender related barriers that prevent women and girls from demanding the realization of their rights, including to information and health services. These barriers include unequal gender norms, household responsibilities such as care work and farming, which may prevent adolescent girls to access sexual and reproductive health services (Shrestha et al., 2020). Additionally, girls may not have autonomous decision-making power over their own health and need to seek permission from their parents to visit the clinic (WHO, 2018).

There is less information available about how to support girls’ own activism and agency in policy and programs. Policymakers and community leadership structures tend to be resistant to meaningful participation, and skeptical of adolescent girls’ engagement. Across the globe, we have seen a growth of regressive national politics in recent years which has had significant impacts on policy options with direct influence on girls’ lives and investments in solutions led by girls for girls are not consistently funded or supported. Young feminists are increasingly calling for a re-thinking of development; emphasizing the centrality of girls’ own voices and leadership in humanitarian response and development efforts (Bashi et al., 2018). Engagement of girls as participants in programs is a basic necessity and fundamental right. The meaningful engagement of girls throughout design, implementation, and monitoring, evaluation and learning processes is a key element of a girl-intentional approach.6

A Side Event Proposal For CSW

This year’s Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65) has “Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls” as its priority theme. It is an opportunity for Member States and their representatives to share lessons and challenges in the design, implementation and scale up of girl-intentional approaches, including the promotion of effective participation to strengthen girls voice and agency.

**Aims**: The side event aims to draw attention to the key ingredients of empowering girl-intentional approaches and share experiences from promising practice programming experiences in LMICs, drawing on evaluation evidence including from ODI, GAGE and UNICEF, in order to inform discussions at CSW and leading up to the Mexico and France Beijing + 25 events later in the year.

**The Organizing Partners**

**UNICEF**: UNICEF’s mandate is to support States to respect and ensure the rights embodied in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) without discrimination of any kind, and to promote comprehensive adolescent development in accordance with their rights. 7 UNICEF’s Gender Action Plans (GAP) (2014-17 and 2018-21) articulate the empowerment and well-being of adolescent girls as a corner stone of the organization’s efforts to advance gender equality, explicitly recognizing ‘the significant disadvantage that the large numbers and proportions of girls face in realizing their rights because of gendered discrimination and underlying gendered power dynamics’. 8 UNICEF is a leader in providing technical assistance on the development of programs, policies and administrative tools, in over 100 countries globally. This year’s CSW65 focus provides a unique opportunity to highlight UNICEF’s global leadership in the area of gender and adolescence.

**ODI**: ODI is a leading global think tank and has a broad programme of work on gender, adolescence and youth, including work investigating gender norms across the lifecycle, research on youth economic empowerment, and age- and gender-responsive social protection. *To be expanded.*

**GAGE**: The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme is a UK Aid (DFID)-funded nine-year (2015-2024) mixed methods longitudinal research and evaluation programme following the lives of 18000 adolescents and their families in diverse developing country contexts (Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal, Rwanda, Jordan and Lebanon). GAGE aims to understand what programmes are most effective in transforming adolescent girls' lives at specific points during

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their teens. Among the interventions GAGE is evaluating, five have a distinct social protection focus, including the Adolescent Girls Programme in Bangladesh, implemented by the Government of Bangladesh and the World Bank; the Act with Her Programme in Ethiopia, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and implemented by Care International and Pathfinder; the Productive Safety Net programme, also in Ethiopia, implemented by the Government of Ethiopia, the World Bank and other donors; the UNHCR cash transfer programme and UNICEF Hajati labelled CT programme in Jordan.

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