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WOMEN & GIRLS



SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT
GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA



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WOMEN & GIRLS: SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Natalie Gonnella-Platts

Director of the Women's Initiative at the George W. Bush Institute

Crystal Cazier

Senior Program Manager of the Global Health Initiative at the George W. Bush Institute

Adolescence and young adulthood are a seminal time for individuals – especially females. Now more than ever, the United States and the international community must do a better job of directly engaging and supporting adolescent girls and young women (AGYW). This is especially important for sub-Saharan Africa, home to the highest saturation of young people in the world.

Our recommendations:

- PRIORITY DISAGGREGATED DATA COLLECTION AND YOUTH-FOCUSED RESEARCH
- INVOLVE AGYW IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES AND REACH OUT TO COMMUNITIES AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS
- IMPLEMENT HOLISTIC SOLUTIONS THAT MEET THE COMPLEX CHALLENGES AGYW FACE
- STRENGTHEN AND ENFORCE POLICIES THAT PROTECT AGENCY AND PROMOTE WELL-BEING
- IMPROVE ACCESS TO INFORMATION
- INVEST IN ORGANIZATIONS FOCUSED ON IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR AGYW AND YOUTH-LED SOLUTIONS

Right now, nearly half of the world's young people live in sub-Saharan Africa. Forty percent are under the age of 15 and just 6% of the [population](#) is 60 or older. By 2050, the entire population across the continent is expected to double.

When empowered, educated, and healthy, AGYW are able to [contribute](#) to accelerated progress for all. Across sub-Saharan Africa, they are organizing and speaking out to protect human dignity and demand transparency and accountability from governments and private-sector institutions.

In the context of economic opportunity alone, “estimates indicate that 11 million youth will be entering the labor market in sub-Saharan Africa each year for the coming decade, with the potential to dramatically promote growth and reduce poverty,” according to the [World Bank](#). This is an important consideration, especially as on the surface, the region has some of the highest [rates of female entrepreneurship](#) and [labor force participation](#) in the world.

But while sub-Saharan Africa’s young population holds great potential, persistent and multifaceted challenges warrant increased attention. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, young people accounted for 60% of Africa’s [jobless](#), with many stuck within informal and alternative employment options.

Economic and other barriers, and their direct and indirect impacts, are even more acute for AGYW. As the [2019 Goalkeepers report](#) reflects: “No matter where you are born, your life will be harder if you are born a girl. If you are born in a poor country or district, it will be even harder.”

AGYW are more likely to live in poverty and less likely to be in school than their male counterparts; face worrying levels of gender-based violence (GBV)—including child marriage, harassment, sexual assault, coercion, and domestic violence; and be at increased risk for adverse health outcomes due to incomplete access to information and services.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has further compounded the challenges.

Despite years of hard-fought efforts to achieve gender parity in education, millions of girls [will not return](#) to school when it is safe to do so. GBV, a shadow pandemic on its own, is also on the rise and remains an immense risk for AGYW. Instability [exacerbates abuse and exploitation](#), and there is a risk of sustained increases in sexual assault, domestic violence, trafficking, and early marriage.

Rising rates of teenage pregnancy have been reported, and higher rates of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STI) are a concern. During a three-month lockdown in Kenya alone, 152,000 AGYW became pregnant, [an increase](#) of 40% over last year’s average for the same period. Additionally, UNAIDS and the World Health Organization (WHO) [estimate](#) increased HIV incidence and more deaths attributed to HIV due to COVID-19, with girls [especially impacted](#).

Perhaps most worrying, the COVID-19 pandemic has halted and reversed progress in reducing global poverty rates. Despite significant economic growth in the region [before](#) the pandemic, the United Nations (U.N.) [estimates](#) that an additional 32 million people in Africa will drop below the international poverty line as a result of the global health emergency, and the accelerated poverty burden will more [acutely impact](#) women and girls.

At a time when AGYW in sub-Saharan Africa need uninterrupted access to services, opportunities, and care, COVID-19 has created [additional barriers](#) to resources and support.

The challenges are complex and interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation of one another. But in these challenges, there are also opportunities to finally correct course, ensuring AGYW across Africa (and beyond) have a chance to thrive.

While the following recommendations were developed with the context of sub-Saharan Africa, they also have wider applicability.

PRIORITIZE DISAGGREGATED DATA COLLECTION AND YOUTH-FOCUSED RESEARCH

The United States and other international stakeholders should initiate and support data collection and research focused on youth populations and the issues they face. This includes the prioritization of disaggregated data sets for broader analysis by age, sex, and region. While attention to the importance of data and storytelling has grown, existing data platforms often do not offer clear perspectives on the status and lived experience of youth and female populations. Much of the differentiated analysis that would be most helpful in the development of gender-, community-, and age-appropriate policy measures is not currently tracked. For example, in the context of COVID-19 alone, “fewer than one in three of the world’s countries are reporting sex-disaggregated data for both COVID-19 cases and deaths,” according to a [data project](#) from Global Health 50/50, ICRW, and the African Population and Health Resource Center. And, more broadly, data needed to monitor 80% of the indicators for global gender equality is lacking, with adolescent girls often overlooked in official data counts, per a 2020 [report](#) from Citi. AGYW play a pivotal role in the pursuit of a better world. Thoughtful evaluation of their status, challenges, and contributions is an important tool to ensure the implementation of responsive and sustainable interventions.

INVOLVE AGYW IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES AND REACH OUT TO COMMUNITIES AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The United States and other international decision-makers should ensure the perspectives of AGYW are included in policy development, implementation, and evaluation. Programs and policies should also include intentional outreach to communities and key stakeholders who can play a role in supporting AGYW.

Meaningful involvement of AGYW could be through appointment and inclusion as youth ambassadors and advisory committee members; expanding opportunities for youth advocates to testify before legislative leaders and participate in town halls; and increasing outreach and two-way communication with youth-led movements and organizations.

Directly engaging broader communities, including men and boys, on gender equality opens reciprocal lines of communication, empathy, and respect. It also leverages the vital influence of allyship to challenge and dismantle restrictive social norms and behaviors – like toxic masculinity – that hold women back.

Additionally, visible influencers can also play a role in supporting AGYW. For example, as apolitical [bridge builders](#), first spouses are uniquely positioned to amplify local solutions and to elevate the [participation](#) of youth activists in critical policy discussions.

IMPLEMENT HOLISTIC SOLUTIONS THAT MEET THE COMPLEX CHALLENGES AGYW FACE

Governments, nongovernmental organizations, and corporations should ensure they are working across and between issues affecting AGYW. This includes funding holistic programs that address complex challenges, developing partnerships that increase cooperation and avoid duplication, and broadening focus to also address structural, cultural, and policy factors that hold girls back. Importantly, the perspectives and input of AGYW should be taken into account when designing, implementing, and evaluating programs. The interplay between various issues is why DREAMS (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe), a partnership led by the U.S. Department of State through the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), provides holistic interventions to address factors that make AGYW vulnerable to HIV. DREAMS also [engages](#) the families, communities, and partners of AGYW. By the end of 2020, DREAMS had [achieved](#) at least a 25% reduction in new HIV incidence among AGYW in most of the districts where it operates by investing in AGYW via holistic programs.

STRENGTHEN AND ENFORCE POLICIES THAT PROTECT AGENCY AND PROMOTE WELL-BEING

Governments should review existing policies to make sure there is an enforceable structure in place to safeguard AGYW. Where policy and legal structures are enforced, AGYW not only have better outcomes and opportunities, but are more protected on their journey to adulthood. Too often policies are antiquated, discretionary, not enforced, or nonexistent. Donors and other international influencers can call for such structures and systems to be in place and support their development where they are not. Initiatives like PEPFAR and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) offer effective examples on how this can be approached, especially in a development context. Civil society can and should hold governments accountable. The United States government and other international donors should allow communities to provide feedback and contribute to direction setting for future program planning and implementation.

IMPROVE ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Governments and implementers need to ensure AGYW have access to accurate and comprehensive health knowledge and best practices. Providing complete information

and confidential access to services equips AGYW with the resources needed to enhance their well-being and safeguard their futures. This in turn positively influences outcomes such as delaying sexual initiation, reducing risk-taking behavior, and increasing protective behavior. Mental health support and training that builds resilience and confidence among AGYW to negotiate what they do and do not want in relationships are equally vital. Delivery of youth friendly guidance should also remain adaptable and responsive to communities. This includes leveraging technology, privacy, and youth-appropriate service delivery to bypass stigma and misinformation, and to meet AGYW where they are.

INVEST IN ORGANIZATIONS FOCUSED ON IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR AGYW AND YOUTH-LED SOLUTIONS

Government, corporate, and foundation donors should purposefully fund youth-led interventions and organizations focused on improving outcomes for AGYW. In addition to increasing access to financial resources, this includes confronting age and gender bias in grantmaking and supporting opportunities that build the capacities of youth leaders and organizations. A 2018 [toolkit](#) from You(th) Do It revealed that over half of the youth-led organizations interviewed “believed that there is a fundamental lack of accessible funding for youth-led initiatives.” And a [2019 study](#) from the Women’s Philanthropy Institute at Indiana University showed that organizations dedicated to women and girls received just 1.6% of total U.S. charitable giving.

There is an African proverb that states, where you will sit when you are old shows where you stood in youth. Today and tomorrow, the status of AGYW in sub-Saharan Africa matters to us all.

Equipping AGYW with the education and access to effectively contribute within the economy advances community and country development. Providing pathways for girls to lead improves stability and peace. Engaging them at decision-making tables ignites ingenuity, inclusion, and innovation.

Investing in AGYW offers an incredible opportunity for progress in the pursuit of a more peaceful and prosperous world - especially considering the size and influence of the youth population across the continent. But this potential can never be fully realized until AGYW everywhere have the access and support to succeed.



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2943 SMU BOULEVARD | DALLAS, TEXAS 75205