

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pathways to Prosperity for Adolescent Girls in Africa

Kehinde Ajayi and Estelle Koussoubé, Editors



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**Kehinde Ajayi and
Estelle Koussoubé, Editors**

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Foreword

In today's dynamic global landscape, investing in adolescent girls is not just a moral imperative, but a sensible economic decision. Evidence-based interventions tailored to adolescent girls' unique needs have the power to catalyze transformative change that reverberates across generations and communities. Because adolescence is a time when key decisions are made that have long-lasting impacts, relatively small investments can change the whole trajectory of a life and thus can have high returns.

At this pivotal moment, with 23 percent of the world's 1.2 billion adolescents residing in Sub-Saharan Africa, the need to act is urgent: millions of adolescent girls across the continent are at crucial turning points in their lives. Despite Africa's vast potential for prosperity, a stark reality remains: 26 percent of adolescent girls ages 15 to 19 in Africa are neither working nor in school, and 27 percent are married or have a child. In comparison, 9 percent of African boys in the same age range are neither working nor in school, and fewer than 3 percent are married or have a child.

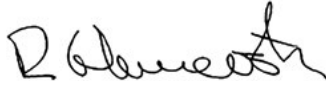
Recognizing the multifaceted nature of the challenges presented by this reality, the Center for Global Development, the Population Council, and the World Bank Group have come together to help countries forge a path forward. The rigorous analysis in this report provides clear routes to evidence-based policy that will not only bolster girls' human capital but also empower them economically, laying the groundwork for sustainable progress.

Pathways to Prosperity for Adolescent Girls in Africa offers hope by distilling actionable recommendations based on rigorous evidence of impact. By delineating various pathways to success and examining the implications for policy and practice, this report charts a course toward tangible, lasting change.

At its core, this endeavor is about unleashing the untapped potential of adolescent girls as catalysts for Africa's economic development. The report recommends a set of strong, yet affordable actions to ensure girls' success, such as:

- Promoting girls' economic success through proven and promising multisectoral interventions.
- Focusing on the most vulnerable girls.
- Adopting a holistic approach in the design of interventions.
- Addressing data and evidence gaps to enable stakeholders to better understand what works.

Illuminating the crucial journey toward achieving empowerment for adolescent girls, this report calls upon policy makers, practitioners, researchers, community leaders, and global partners to turn vision into reality. We invite you to join us in helping countries usher in a future in which every African girl can thrive. Together, let us harness the power of data-driven investment to shape a brighter tomorrow for generations to come.



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Key Messages

- Africa holds the key to its own prosperity: investing in the untapped economic potential of adolescent girls.
- To succeed, adolescent girls must obtain the skills, resources, and agency they need for autonomy and prosperity in adulthood.
- The reality, however, is different for adolescent girls in Africa. Currently, 40 percent of 15- to 19-year-old girls in Africa are out of school and not working or are married or have children, compared with 12 percent of boys in the same age range, highlighting the urgent need for action.
- This report recommends six strong but affordable sets of actions to ensure adolescent girls succeed:
 1. **Improve adolescent girls' health and education** by reducing out-of-pocket costs, expanding access, and providing youth-friendly services.
 2. **Promote their economic success** through proven and promising multisectoral interventions that integrate technical and life skills training with employment support, tailored to labor market demands and contextual factors.
 3. **Make the most vulnerable girls the priority**, ensuring that no one is left behind.
 4. **Adopt a holistic approach** to the design of interventions for adolescent girls, recognizing the multidimensional nature of empowerment.
 5. **Address data and evidence gaps** to inform effective policies and programs.
 6. **Foster collaboration and mobilize support** from diverse stakeholders to achieve sustainable impact.
- By implementing these recommendations between now and 2040, African countries could unlock an additional \$2.4 trillion in income. With the right investments and support, adolescent girls could be the drivers of Africa's economic transformation.



Executive Summary

Why Prioritize Pathways to Prosperity for Adolescent Girls in Africa?

Africa is the world's youngest region.¹ It holds the key to its own prosperity: investing in the untapped economic potential of its adolescents, particularly its adolescent girls. More than one-fifth of the world's adolescent girls (ages 10–19)—145 million—reside in Africa, and this share is expected to increase to more than one-third by 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2024). For Africa to win the battle against poverty and achieve sustained economic growth, strategic investments are imperative. These investments must flow to adolescent girls, equipping them with the human capital fundamentals, enabling resources, and agency essential to live economically prosperous adult lives.

Despite their potential, adolescent girls in Africa face distinct gender-specific challenges that significantly affect their economic prospects. The region has the highest incidence of child marriage for girls globally, with one in three African girls marrying before the age of 18. Notably, western and central Africa are home to 7 of the 10 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage worldwide (UNICEF 2022). Furthermore, although some progress has been made in the past 25 years, these improvements have primarily benefited the wealthiest households; child marriage rates continue to rise among the poorest in Africa (UNICEF 2023). Child marriage is often associated with early childbearing and a higher fertility rate over a girl's lifetime, with significant negative consequences for both girls and their children across various domains, including health and their future labor market outcomes (Petroni et al. 2017; Wodon et al. 2017).

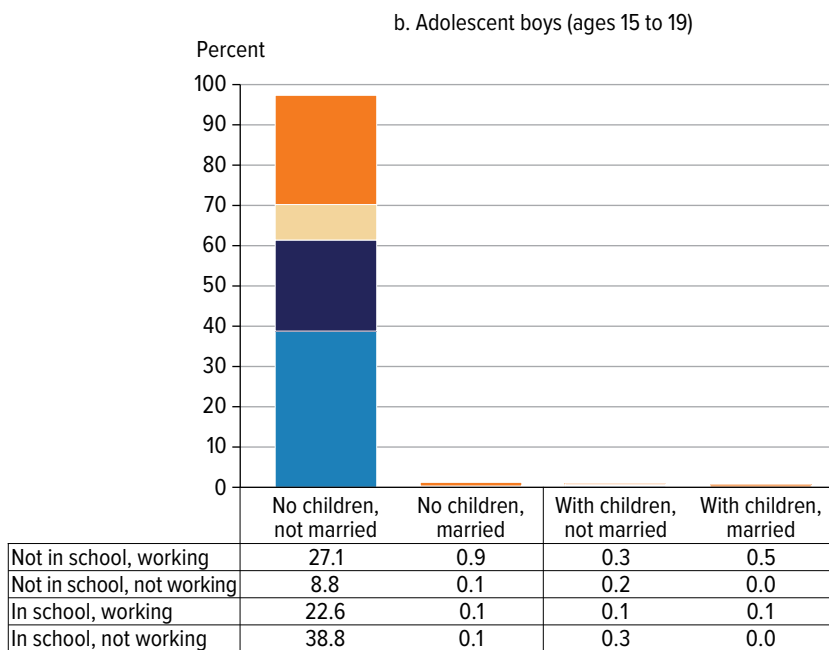
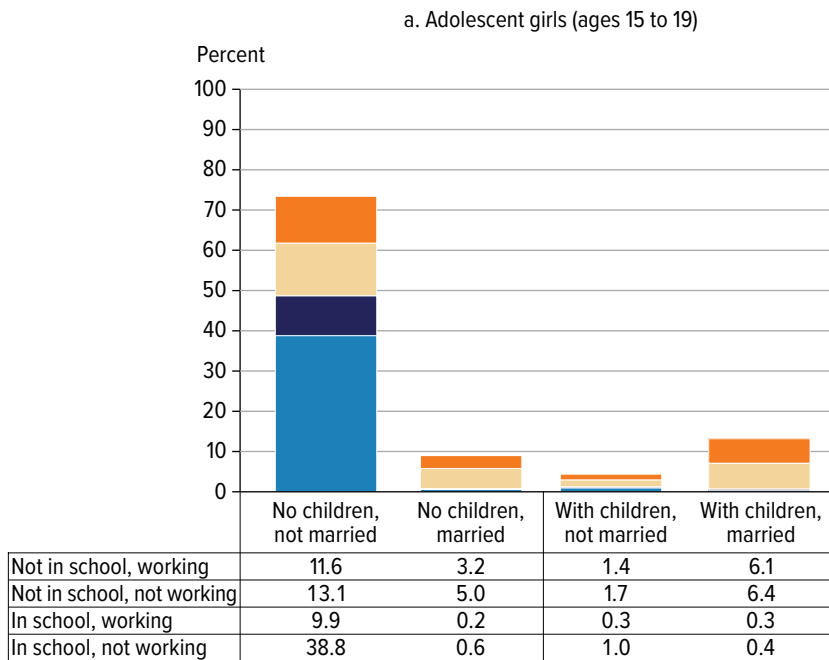
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Gender gaps in Africa emerge before adolescence and widen during the transition to adolescence and then adulthood. Although there are relatively small gender gaps in schooling among 10- to 14-year-olds in most African countries, girls are typically more likely to participate in household work and boys are more likely to participate in paid work. In the older-adolescent group (ages 15–19), a significant number of girls in Africa (26 percent) are neither working nor in school, compared with about 9 percent of boys. Additionally, about 22 percent of these girls are married, compared with only 1 percent of boys. As these older adolescents transition into young adulthood (ages 20–24), the gender disparity becomes even more pronounced. Among young women in this age group, 56 percent are married with children, whereas fewer than 16 percent remain in school. In contrast, young men are more likely to continue their education or enter the labor force, and 71 percent remain unmarried without children (figure ES.1).

Adolescent girls' empowerment is not just a matter of human rights; it is also a valuable investment. This report reveals that every dollar invested in adolescent girls' empowerment can generate more than a tenfold return in economic impact. The net benefit of such investments amounts to approximately \$2.4 trillion. This stands in contrast to the total cost of investing in the next two generations of girls across all countries, which amounts to less than \$200 billion (Rossouw et al. 2024).

How can countries—in particular, African countries—build a pathway to prosperity for adolescent girls? This report seeks to answer this key question. Drawing on recent initiatives and rigorous research geared toward identifying and addressing the distinct challenges faced by adolescent girls in Africa, the report presents new analyses and a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding, measuring, and improving adolescent girls' empowerment. This approach considers the diverse range of experiences and needs among adolescent girls, taking into account factors such as their educational status, marital status, and whether they have children. The report concludes by charting a course of policy action to build pathways to prosperity for adolescent girls.

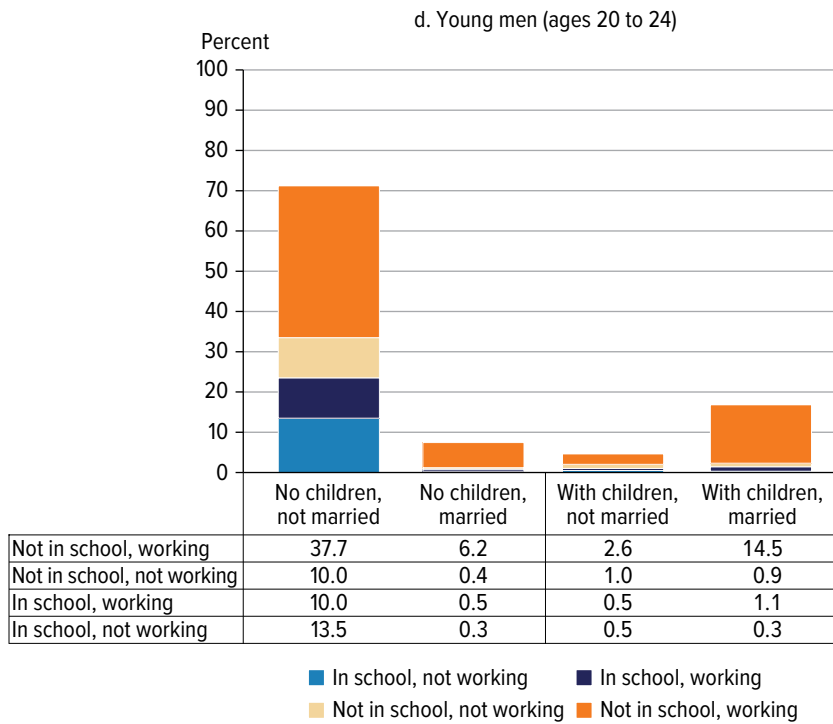
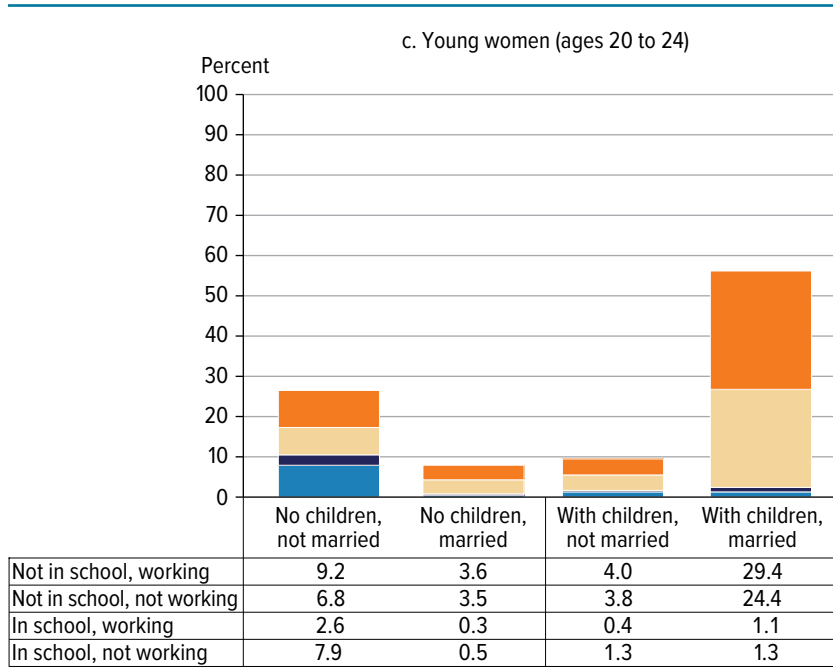
FIGURE ES.1 The Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood Is Starker for Girls Than for Boys



■ In school, not working ■ In school, working
■ Not in school, not working ■ Not in school, working

(continued)

FIGURE ES.1 The Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood Is Starker for Girls Than for Boys (*continued*)



Source: Original figure for this report, based on data from USAID’s Demographic and Health Surveys, accessed, March 17, 2024, <https://www.dhsprogram.com>.

What Does Adolescent Girls' Empowerment Mean?

Empowering adolescent girls holds critical importance for poverty reduction and economic growth in Africa. However, achieving this goal demands a departure from the conventional business-as-usual approach. Women's empowerment frameworks have laid the foundation for conceptualizing the dimensions of empowerment for both women and girls. However, what it *means* to be empowered is different for girls and women. Adolescent girls differ from women in significant ways within and across the main dimensions of empowerment: resources, agency, and achievements. Relative to women, girls' access to resources, such as financial institutions or sexual and reproductive health services, is constrained, as is their capacity for making decisions and setting goals.






Even among adolescent girls, pathways to future empowerment vary considerably. Some adolescent girls may develop skills, resources, and agency, leading to better job prospects as adults. For others, the path to empowerment may be steeper because of life transitions like dropping out of school, early marriage, or childbearing.

This report introduces an adapted framework for understanding adolescent girls' empowerment, emphasizing four key components:

- **Human capital fundamentals:** Education and health provide the bedrock for adolescent girls' future economic success.
- **Enabling resources:** These include knowledge and skills, financial capital, physical and digital capital, social capital, and time available for productive activities.
- **Agency:** Girls must be able to exert their voices, set goals, and make decisions.
- **Context:** This includes fragility, conflict, and violence; statutory laws; formal institutions; social norms and religion; labor market opportunities; and household context.

Together, these four components of adolescent girls' empowerment combine and interact to make up a fifth component, long-term **economic achievements**, such as income and participation in age-appropriate paid work (table ES.1).

TABLE ES.1 Components of Adolescent Girls' Empowerment Influence Their Long-Term Economic Achievements

Component	Indicator	Specific measures for indicator
 Human capital fundamentals	Educational progress	Educational enrollment, attainment, and attendance; grade progression; literacy skills; numeracy skills
	Health	Survival/mortality; sexual and reproductive health rights; mental health; nutrition
 Enabling resources	Knowledge and skills	Life skills (including socioemotional skills); financial literacy
	Financial capital	Access to economic resources: bank accounts, loans; economic assets: savings
	Physical and digital capital	Household assets; personal assets; access to digital spaces; cell phones
	Social capital	Peer networks; access to safe spaces
	Time	Time for engaging in productive activity
 Agency	Goal setting	Aspirations for education, work, marriage, and childbearing
	Sense of agency	Self-efficacy; self-esteem; locus of control; gender attitudes
	Control	Control over decision-making and time use
 Context	Fragility, conflict, and violence	Prevalence and duration of conflict and violence
	Statutory laws/legal framework	Laws relating to gender, resources, work, minimum age for marriage, minimum age for work, gender-based violence, and access to identification documents
	Formal institutions	Presence and characteristics of other formal institutions: schools; health; vocational, legal, and financial services (including banks and rotating savings and credit associations)
	Norms and religion	Expectations regarding gender roles, resource access and use, work, age of marriage, and gender-based violence; religious beliefs
	Labor market opportunities	Sector-specific access to jobs; quality of available job opportunities
	Household context	Parental and household members' gender attitudes; parental aspirations for girls' education and work; relationship dynamics in households (cooperation among household members, discussions among household members on various topics, etc.); household structure and composition
	 Economic achievement	Labor market outcomes

Source: Original table for this report.

Note: AG = agency; CO = context; EA = economic achievement; EN = enabling resources; HC = human capital fundamentals.

The conceptual framework presented in the report differs from existing frameworks in the African context (for example, Calder and Huda 2013; Jones et al. 2019; Moll 2018), not only in emphasizing components such as context and enabling resources, but also in considering the fact that girls may follow diverse paths to empowerment, whether a particular girl's path may be pursuing education exclusively without getting married or having children, or an alternative path that navigates transitions such as school dropout, early marriage, and childbearing. For a discussion of the challenges in measuring adolescent girls' empowerment and potential solutions, see box ES.1.

BOX ES.1 Measuring Adolescent Girls' Empowerment: Challenges and Path Forward

Why does measuring adolescent girls' empowerment matter?

Measuring adolescent girls' empowerment is crucial for informed policy and program design but remains challenging. Existing frameworks primarily focus on women's empowerment, and empowerment-specific measurement guidance for adolescent girls is limited. Measurement gaps in surveys include a lack of questions on digital capital, on agency aspects like control over time use, and on job quality. Additionally, surveys show little variation in question types across demographic groups, limiting understanding of subgroup nuances.

Key measurement challenges

1. **Lack of theoretical framework:** The absence of a clear theoretical framework for measurement of adolescent girls' empowerment leads to inconsistent measures across studies and surveys.
2. **Limited differentiation:** Measurement tools do not adequately differentiate among diverse demographic groups, making it hard to understand disparities.
3. **Survey variation:** Surveys vary significantly in wording and aspects measured, making comparisons regarding adolescent girls' empowerment difficult.

The path forward

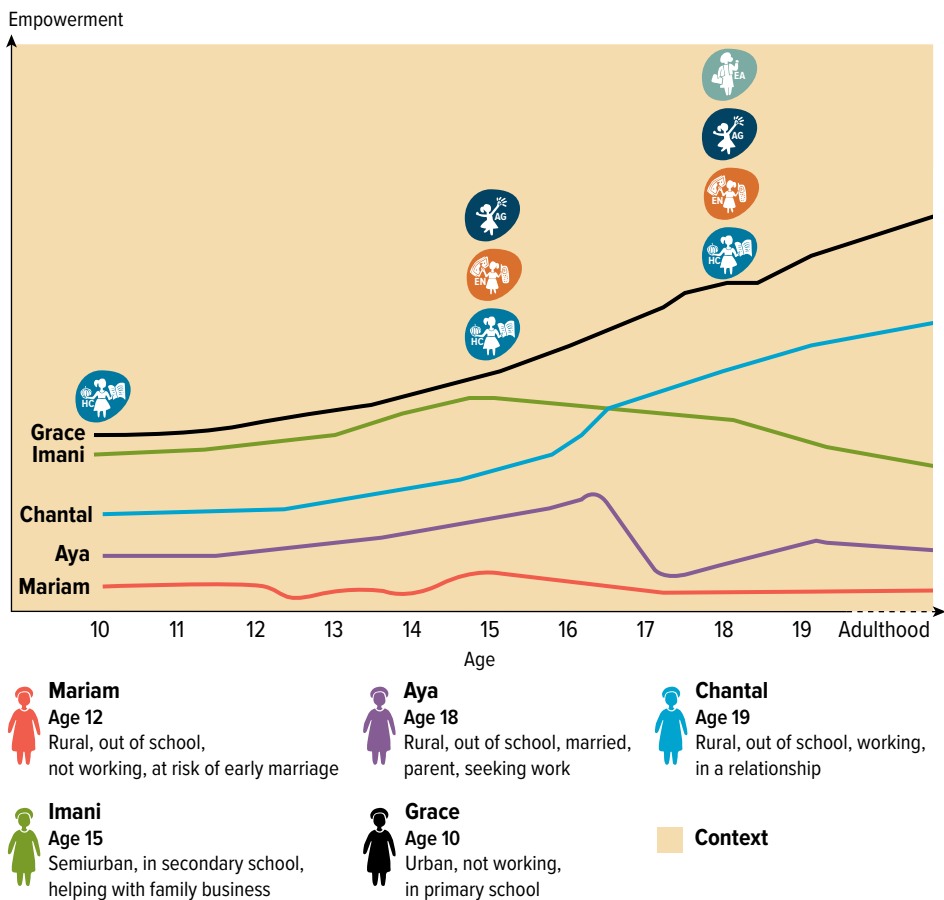
These measurement challenges highlight the need for comprehensive and standardized measurement of adolescent girls' empowerment through three critical next steps.

1. **Prioritizing conceptualization:** Develop a clear and standardized conceptual framework for adolescent girls' empowerment. Ensure inclusivity by consulting with diverse stakeholders and practitioners to accommodate the varied needs and aspirations of adolescent girls.
2. **Coordinating efforts:** Standardize and harmonize key measures of adolescent girls' empowerment to enhance comparability and reliability, drawing inspiration from relevant successful practices for measuring women's economic empowerment.
3. **Developing new measures:** Create new tools, including community-level instruments, to cover underrepresented dimensions of adolescent girls' empowerment.

Each component of empowerment will evolve during adolescence, preparing girls to be economically prosperous in adulthood (figure ES.2). However, the evolution of these components and their relative prominence at different ages depend on girls' initial endowment in each component at the beginning of adolescence (age 10) and the various transitions they experience as they progress through adolescence.

The key components of adolescent girls' empowerment also differ by demographic group. To illustrate this diversity of experiences and their relationship with the components of empowerment, the report presents five profiles of adolescent girls residing in various parts of Africa, each represented by a distinct line in figure ES.2.

FIGURE ES.2 Adolescent Girls Can Follow Alternative Pathways toward Empowerment in Adulthood



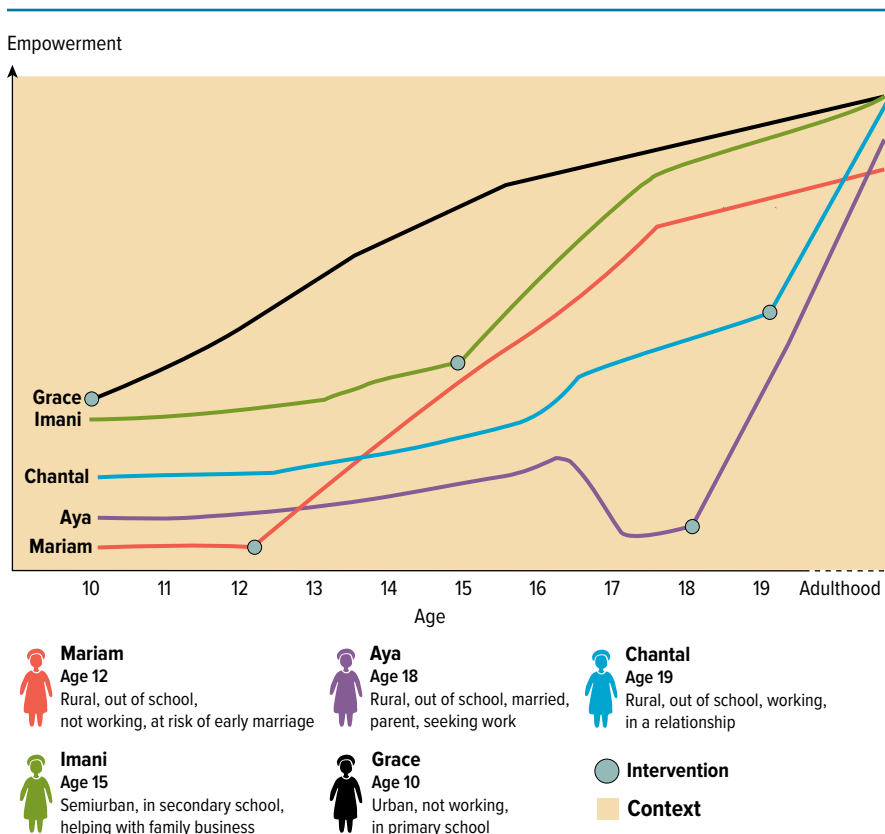
Source: Original figure for this report.

Note: AG = agency; EA = economic achievement; EN = enabling resources; HC = human capital fundamentals. See table ES.1 for additional information about each component.

The framework employed in this report demonstrates that girls' pathways to empowerment in adulthood vary depending on their starting point in adolescence and the timing of interventions (figure ES.3). Throughout the report, this framework serves as a guide for evaluating the design and effectiveness of programs and policies, with a recognition that no single intervention will adequately meet the needs of all adolescent girls in Africa.

While not explicitly part of the framework, two cross-cutting experiences that interact with pathways to empowerment are important to consider for a more holistic view of adolescent girls' empowerment: gender-based violence and disabilities. Experiences of gender-based violence or harmful practices perpetrated at home, in school, in public spaces, within marriage,

FIGURE ES.3 Appropriately Designed Interventions to Support Adolescent Girls Can Boost Their Empowerment at Any Age, Whether They Are Still in School or Already Out of School, Are Married or Not, or Do or Do Not Have Children



Source: Original figure for this report.

or in the workplace can affect multiple aspects of empowerment, including school attendance and performance, girls' sense of agency, and their ability to make decisions that affect their well-being. Girls often face a higher risk of violence during adolescence—more than at any other time in their lives. However, they may be less likely to report experiences of violence, given potential threats to their personal or family reputation. These risks of gender-based violence, combined with more limited access to services and support for survivors, present an important barrier to empowerment for adolescent girls. Physical and mental disabilities may also affect girls' ability to fulfill their educational and economic goals and minimize agency depending on the presence of societal norms and resources related to disabilities.

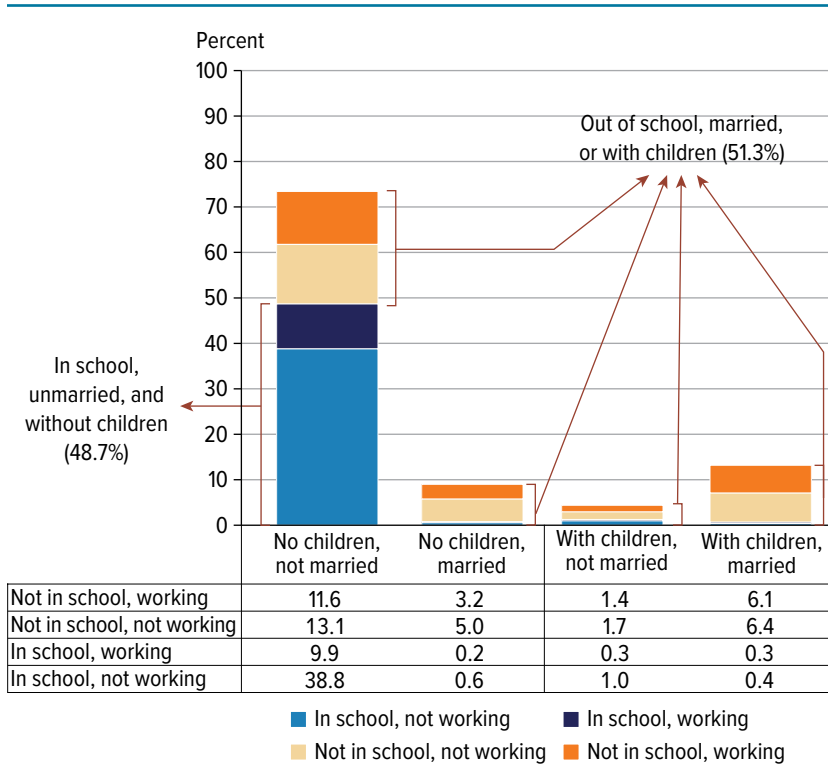
How Diverse Are Adolescent Girls' Experiences in Africa, and How Does the Diversity Matter for Their Prosperity?

A common policy aspiration in African countries is to ensure that adolescent girls remain in school, delay childbearing, and delay marriage. School enrollment rates for younger adolescent girls (ages 10–14) have reached more than 80 percent in many of these countries. However, by the time they get to older adolescence, less than half of 15- to 19-year-old girls are still exclusively in school, without having gotten married or having had children (figure ES.4).

Whereas regional trends in schooling and work have generally been positive, regional trends in marriage and childbearing have been mixed. Over the past 20 years, the percentage of 15- to 19-year-old girls in school increased in most African countries. Most African countries, but not all, also saw a decline in the share of girls who are out of school and exclusively working. Marriage rates generally fell across countries over this time frame. However, some countries saw increases, including Madagascar, Niger, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. Additionally, the percentage of adolescent girls with children largely declined, except in a few countries, including Burundi and Zambia. In Comoros, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, both rates of marriage and having children among adolescent girls increased over the past 20 years.

Adolescent girls' experiences vary not only across countries, but also within them, partly reflecting the countries' cultural, social, legal, and economic environments. Although country-level indicators provide valuable insights, they tend to mask subnational variation. Within individual countries, variations in outcomes such as rates of school enrollment, marriage, and childbearing, as well as gender attitudes, can be just as substantial as variations across countries. For a deeper exploration of the complexity of adolescent girls' empowerment and insights from impact evaluation surveys across African countries, see box ES.2.

FIGURE ES.4 Over Half of 15- to 19-Year-Old Girls in Africa Are Out of School or Married or Have a Child



Source: Original figure for this report, based on data from USAID's Demographic and Health Surveys, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://www.dhsprogram.com>.

While recognizing the diversity of experiences within countries, this report categorizes countries into five distinct groups, each characterized by common features that reflect the intersections among rates of schooling, work, marriage, and childbearing (figure ES.5). Notably, these country categories correlate with the prevalence of gender-related laws in each type of context, which suggests the importance of the legal context in shaping adolescent girls' experiences (table ES.2). These five categories provide an instructive tool for understanding patterns in the experiences of adolescent girls and offer insight into approaches for supporting empowerment.

BOX ES.2 Exploring the Complexity of Adolescent Girls' Empowerment: Insights from Impact Evaluation Surveys in Africa

Why is a holistic approach necessary to effectively empower adolescent girls?

Empowering adolescent girls in Africa requires recognizing that empowerment is inherently multidimensional. Although interventions focusing on education and health are crucial for laying the foundation of success in adulthood, they are not sufficient to improve all dimensions of empowerment. Additionally, life transitions such as marriage and childbearing often significantly hinder girls' acquisition of human capital and agency, further constraining their ability to realize their full potential.

Key insights from selected African countries

This report uses data from impact evaluations of programs targeting adolescent girls across 11 countries in Africa to shed light on the complex interrelationships among various dimension of empowerment and how these dimensions manifest themselves across different life stages:

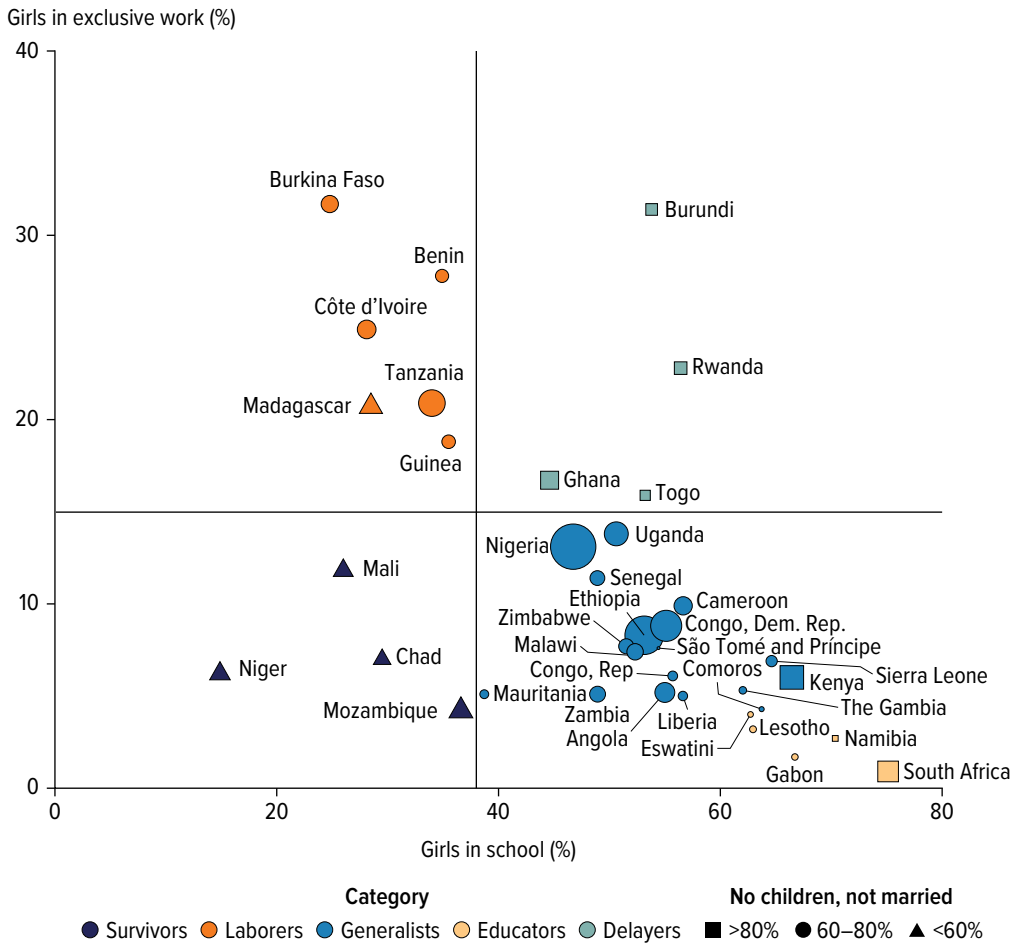
1. **Multidimensional empowerment:** Empowerment among adolescent girls is multidimensional. Girls may exhibit empowerment in one domain while lacking it in another. Recognizing these variations is essential for designing effective empowerment programs.
2. **Weak correlations between empowerment dimensions:** There are generally weak correlations between human capital fundamentals (education and health) and other dimensions of empowerment, suggesting a need for holistic interventions that go beyond basic education and health to effectively enhance empowerment.
3. **Impact of life transitions and contextual factors:** Life transitions, like marriage and childbearing, and contextual factors deeply affect girls' empowerment. Married girls and young mothers face substantial challenges in maintaining their educational pursuits and pursuing their career aspirations, although some manage to retain or even enhance certain resources and achievements.

The path forward

These findings carry significant implications for shaping policies and programs aimed at empowering girls in Africa. The key points underscored by the analysis include the following:

1. **Broadening empowerment strategies:** Policies and programs should extend beyond just education and health to encompass a broader spectrum of empowerment strategies, putting a priority on comprehensive support, including skills development and social protection.
2. **Tailored interventions:** Tailoring interventions to the specific needs of different demographic groups of girls, especially vulnerable ones such as young mothers balancing work or schooling with childcare responsibilities, is essential for effective empowerment.
3. **Harnessing digital tools:** Leveraging digital technologies can be a powerful means for reaching and supporting adolescent girls. However, it is crucial to ensure that girls have the necessary resources and skills to make the most of these opportunities.
4. **Continuous evaluation:** Constant monitoring and evaluation are vital to understand the evolving challenges and opportunities faced by adolescent girls in Africa, ensuring that policies and programs remain responsive and effective.

FIGURE ES.5 There Are Systematic Cross-Country Differences in Adolescent Girls' Experiences



Source: Original figure for this report, based on data from USAID's Demographic and Health Surveys, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://www.dhsprogram.com>.

Note: Figure shows percentages of 15- to 19-year-old unmarried girls with no children who are enrolled in school (horizontal axis) and are exclusively working (vertical axis). The size of each country marker reflects country population size.

TABLE ES.2 Cross-Country Differences in Adolescent Girls' Experiences Correlate with Countries' Legal Environments

Country category	Key country characteristics	Relevant country laws
Marriage and childbearing delayers	The most successful at delaying marriage and childbearing among adolescent girls. Relatively high levels of schooling and work among adolescent girls.	All countries in this category have laws ensuring that a woman can get a job, a bank account, and national identification documents in the same way as a man.
Educators	Highest levels of school enrollment among adolescent girls, yet relatively low levels of employment, even for girls who are out of school.	All countries in this category have laws promoting education (free postprimary schooling and marriage ages above 18).
Generalists	Moderate levels among adolescent girls in regard to all characteristics: marriage and fertility delay, schooling, and work.	Countries in this category have a mix of legal environments and are not leaders in any domain of gender legal reforms.
Laborers	Highest levels of work among adolescent girls, with relatively low levels of schooling and moderate rates of marriage and childbearing.	Countries in this category are more likely to have employment-related laws (for example, ensuring women can get a job in the same way as men, equal pay for equal work, 14 weeks of paid leave for mothers) and laws prohibiting gender discrimination in credit access.
Survivors	Highest levels of vulnerability among adolescent girls. All countries in this category are low-income countries classified as fragility, conflict, or violence settings by the World Bank, with the highest rates of marriage and childbearing among adolescent girls, the lowest levels of schooling, and a high share who are not in work or schooling.	All countries in this category have laws that women and men can access national identification documents in the same way, presenting a foundation for access to social services.

Source: Original table for this report, based on data from USAID's Demographic and Health Surveys, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://www.dhsprogram.com>, and World Bank 2020.

What Do We Know about What Works to Build Human Capital Fundamentals and Enhance Economic Success for Adolescent Girls?

A strong foundation in human capital is crucial for achieving success in today's world and ensuring a smooth transition to a productive and healthy adulthood. Adolescence is a period in which girls experience rapid physical, emotional, social, and cognitive changes. Making investments in education and health during girls' adolescent years a priority can profoundly influence girls' adulthood and even shape the trajectory of the next generation.

Such investments align with the promotion of a life path in which adolescent girls can educate themselves, adopt healthy lifestyles, and delay family formation. For girls pursuing alternative life paths, human capital fundamentals also play a crucial role in skills development and broader capital accumulation. However, it is essential to recognize that improving girls' human capital fundamentals doesn't automatically guarantee a successful transition into productive, safe, and dignified employment or a significant reduction in gender gaps in economic achievement in adulthood. Several factors, including marriage, childbearing, gender roles, and norms related to women's employment and household dynamics, also come into play (see, for example, Carvalho and Evans 2022; Elder and Kring 2016; Klasen 2019).

To empower adolescent girls to realize their economic potential and thrive in adulthood, it is crucial to expand beyond establishing human capital fundamentals. This involves promoting enabling resources, including socioemotional skills, financial literacy, and access to networks; fostering agency; and creating an environment conducive to their economic achievements. This report reviews the evidence on interventions addressing each of these areas and categorizes them as follows: (1) effective: at least three rigorous studies show the intervention has positive and statistically significant effects; (2) promising: one or two rigorous studies show the intervention has positive and statistically significant effects; (3) mixed: rigorous studies yield a mix of positive and negative statistically significant effects for the intervention or show it has no statistically significant effects; (4) no effect: at least two rigorous studies show the intervention has no statistically significant effects; (5) unknown or little evidence: fewer than two rigorous studies investigate the intervention and assess its effects (see table ES.3).

TABLE ES.3 Evidence-Based Interventions Can Build Pathways to Prosperity

Intervention	Improving human capital fundamentals	Enhancing economic success
In-kind transfers for schooling	Effective	Effective
Comprehensive economic empowerment programs	Unknown	Effective
School fee reduction or elimination	Effective	Promising
School feeding	Effective	Promising
Improving quality of instruction	Effective	Unknown
Health services	Effective	Unknown
Sexual and reproductive health education	Effective	Unknown
Cash transfers	Effective	Mixed
Employment opportunities for women	Promising	Promising
Engaging boys, parents, and community	Promising	Promising
Information on return to education or on training	Promising	Promising
Child marriage ban	Promising	Unknown
Edutainment programs	Promising	Unknown
Inheritance law reform	Promising	Unknown
School construction	Promising	Unknown
Girls' group empowerment programs	Mixed	Mixed
Other life skills training, mentoring, and empowerment programs	Mixed	Mixed
Financial inclusion programs	Unknown	Mixed
Traditional vocational and business skills training	Unknown	Mixed

Source: Original table for this report.

The successful implementation of these interventions requires careful attention to design and execution. A notable example is the increasing adoption of girls' groups, or "safe spaces," as platforms to reach adolescent girls, especially those out of school. However, the evidence on their impact on adolescent girls' outcomes is mixed, calling for careful consideration of the key factors necessary to ensure their successful implementation. Box ES.3 provides detailed insights into the critical elements for effectively designing and implementing safe spaces programs.

BOX ES.3 Key Considerations for Successful Implementation of Safe Spaces

Since the mid-2010s, the girls' groups—"safe spaces"—approach has gained prominence in programming for adolescent girls, supported by a growing evidence base and practical guidance tools.

Key insights on safe spaces

Safe spaces are often referred to as a type of program for adolescent girls, but they should be viewed as a flexible platform for delivering a wide range of interventions. Safe spaces typically include three core features: a group of girls, regular meetings at a designated location, and a mentor who leads the group. Importantly, safe spaces are not limited to specific thematic areas and are adaptable to address diverse needs. They can also be implemented alongside additional interventions that engage girls' households, schools, and communities.

Critical factors for successful implementation

Implementers and experts have reached a consensus on critical factors for successful safe spaces implementation along the program delivery chain, as shown in table BES.3.1.

TABLE BES.3.1 Each Step in the Program Delivery Chain Necessitates Critical Factors for Successful Implementation

Step in program delivery chain	Critical factors
Community outreach	Involving the community during program preparation is essential for building ownership and trust in the program. Effective outreach methods include organizing family days, celebrations, and home visits by mentors. Leveraging peer networks and influential community members can encourage participation, and tailoring messaging to respect local customs is crucial.
Recruiting and supporting mentors	Mentors are critical to program quality, and their preferred qualifications depend on the context. Positive mentor performance is associated with characteristics such as being female, coming from the same communities as beneficiaries, speaking the local language, and having basic literacy and good social and leadership skills. Mentors need training, ongoing supervision, and support.
Targeting	Achieving change requires working with a critical mass of girls in a given area. Making it a priority to reach more girls in the same community before expanding to additional communities is important.
Recruiting girls	Outreach efforts should be inclusive and tailored to reach vulnerable, younger, out-of-school, and at-risk girls. Strategies like door-to-door recruitment and surveys or censuses can help identify potential beneficiaries and their specific needs.

(continued)

BOX ES.3 Key Considerations for Successful Implementation of Safe Spaces (*continued*)**TABLE BES.3.1** Each Step in the Program Delivery Chain Necessitates Critical Factors for Successful Implementation (*continued*)

Step in program delivery chain	Critical factors
Finding a location	Locations of safe spaces should be identified in consultation with communities, ensuring they are easily accessible, are private, and meet basic needs. Investing in making the spaces pleasant environments is essential.
Forming groups	Consideration should be given to segmenting groups based on characteristics like age, marital status, and educational enrollment status. Special considerations are needed for working with migrants or refugees and local populations in the same communities, and girls with disabilities should be included.
Defining content	Curriculums should align with participants' aspirations and address key challenges. Topics should be sequenced carefully, starting with foundational topics like life skills and basic literacy.
Delivering services	Program intensity is crucial; meetings should be regular and frequent. Sessions should be long enough to cover training and allow for feedback. Various participatory techniques can be used, and material should avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes.
Engaging with key stakeholders	Identifying key stakeholders and potential champions in the community can be helpful. Parallel safe spaces can be set up to provide information and training to strategic stakeholders like parents and boys, although this approach carries some risks.
Monitoring and evaluation	Access to good monitoring data and understanding program success and challenges are essential. Purposeful monitoring, evaluation, and learning measures should provide actionable information. Qualitative feedback mechanisms can improve program quality.
Scaling up	Challenges related to scaling up include program cost, implementing capacity, mentor availability, coordination with similar programs, and embedding within a national system.

Source: Original table for this report.

Beyond the design of interventions themselves, it is imperative to pay attention to political economy factors that can impede program and policy development and implementation and legal reforms. Key considerations include securing government support, underscoring the economic benefits of adolescent girls' empowerment initiatives, engaging with influential community leaders, and fostering regional coordination and collaboration.

The achievement of successful legal reforms, such as those targeting child marriage, relies on these considerations as well as on building extensive coalitions of partners and active engagement with the legal community.

How Should the Path Forward Be Forged?

The path forward in the journey to empower adolescent girls for success in Africa is clear and multifaceted. This report outlines six primary areas for policy and targeted programmatic action:

1. **Building human capital fundamentals through improved health and education.** Establishing core education and health resources during adolescence matters not only for its intrinsic value, but also for enhancing girls' agency and their accumulation of other resources. Strategies should aim to reduce households' out-of-pocket schooling costs through proven strategies like fee elimination, school feeding, and cash transfers to boost school enrollment and learning; expand access through school construction and transport; promote the use of promising strategies such as comprehensive interventions that combine sexual and reproductive health education with youth-friendly services and micronutrient supplementation to further improve girls' health and education outcomes; and leverage the mutually reinforcing connection between building a robust human capital foundation and delaying marriage and childbearing to yield multiplicative effects.
2. **Complementing human capital investments with interventions that provide girls with essential resources, agency, and a supportive environment conducive to their success.** Empowering adolescent girls for success goes beyond establishing human capital fundamentals. Strategies should foster integration of market-aligned vocational training, business support, life skills training, and other employment support into comprehensive economic empowerment programs to boost girls' employment and income, especially for those who are out of school; support investment in promising approaches aiming to expand and improve the services and opportunities to which girls have access, including employment opportunities for women; promote adoption of a nuanced approach to interventions like cash transfers and girls' clubs, adapting their design to local needs to enhance effectiveness and cost-efficiency at scale; and encourage customization of interventions to address contextual factors such as relevant legal frameworks, labor market structures, fragility and conflict, and community and household contexts, to ensure sustainable improvements in girls' empowerment outcomes.

3. **Tailoring interventions to address the diverse circumstances and needs of girls, putting a priority on the most vulnerable.** Strategies should identify and assign priority to various groups of girls, particularly the most vulnerable ones, including those from the poorest households, rural areas with limited resources, or areas affected by violence, bearing in mind that definitions of vulnerability may extend to many other circumstances and characteristics, such as ethnicity, religion, or disabilities. Girls managing dual roles of working and being in school, or working and taking care of children, require tailored programs to support their needs for continuing education, accessing childcare, and earning income. Young mothers and married girls face unique obstacles to continuing their education and need support to enhance their human capital fundamentals and accumulate other resources.
4. **Adopting a holistic approach in the design of interventions.** Policies should anticipate potential challenges that may arise at different stages of program development and implementation. Factors such as program costs, implementation capacity, and alignment with existing initiatives must be carefully considered. Additionally, leveraging digital tools and platforms can be beneficial for reaching girls who are out of school, marry early, or reside in rural areas, given evidence of expanding digital access across different countries, with different demographics, and across different socioeconomic groups. Technological innovations can also lower costs, given the challenges of tight fiscal space.
5. **Addressing data and evidence gaps.** Strategies should encourage development and testing measures in areas in which measurement is lacking, such as aspects of context, digital capital, and job quality, and promote generation of evidence and design of programs that allow an assessment of not only what works, but what works for whom, in particular for married adolescents and girls with children, who have often been overlooked. Policies should also make a priority of measuring program quality from the outset, using detailed indicators for assessing implementation effectiveness. Additional insights about cost-effectiveness are needed to understand the trade-offs among promising interventions. Effective avenues for scale-up are necessary to expand the scope of proven approaches.
6. **Mobilizing key stakeholders and fostering collaboration.** Strategies should aim to rally support from a diverse range of stakeholders, including community, national, and regional leaders; governmental bodies; the private sector; civil society; nongovernmental organizations; and other development partners. They should emphasize both the social and economic benefits of empowering adolescent girls, supported by a robust analytical framework, and facilitate collaboration among stakeholders to effectively implement evidence-based interventions, encompassing both programs and policy or legal reforms.

In contemplating the future of empowering adolescent girls for economic and overall success, it is essential to recognize that adolescent girls are a diverse group. Tailored approaches that consider diversity among them must be developed, and any efforts at scaling up should account for costs, capacity, and contextual factors, including those related to political economy, that may influence the effectiveness of interventions in different areas. Policy makers should ask themselves: What are the specific challenges confronted by, for instance, Aya, our 18-year-old married mother in a rural community? What resources and support does she require? Similarly, what does Imani, our 15-year-old in a semiurban setting, need to thrive? What are the most effective and cost-effective ways to put these girls and others like them, as well as others with different but equally valid needs, on a path to success? Box ES.4 summarizes the key innovations and contributions of this report to the ongoing dialogue on adolescent girls' empowerment in Africa.

The dialogue this report seeks to initiate should not revolve around whether policy makers act to improve girls' empowerment, but rather how they can effectively, equitably, and urgently do so. The cost of inaction is high. The time for change is now.

BOX ES.4 What Is New in This Report

Quantifying the return on investment

This report presents a compelling case for investing in adolescent girls in Africa by calculating the economic gains to be realized from crucial investment of this type. Incorporating estimates of effects of interventions to empower adolescent girls and associated implementation costs, it concretely demonstrates the potential for achieving a tenfold return from investments over the next 15 years.

Conceptual framework

Taking a comprehensive view, this report proposes a fresh conceptual framework that highlights a path toward the realization of empowerment for adolescent girls at different ages—pursuing education exclusively without marriage or childbearing. Additionally, it acknowledges alternative paths that reflect the reality that many adolescent girls in Africa have already dropped out of school, gotten married, started childbearing, or any combination of these.

New analysis

The report presents a novel overview of key facts about adolescent girls in Africa that matter for defining and measuring empowerment, drawing on data from a number of sources, including the Demographic and Health Surveys, the United Nations Children's Fund's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, the World Bank's Global Financial Inclusion Index (Findex) database and Women, Business, and the Law database, and data from impact evaluation surveys of programs for

(continued)

BOX ES.4 What Is New in This Report (continued)

adolescent girls in Africa. It outlines the first data-driven categorization of countries by adolescent girls' empowerment status, providing an innovative tool for policy guidance.

Evidence reviews

Two chapters in the report present narrative reviews of existing evidence on the impacts of interventions to improve adolescent girls' human capital fundamentals and to enhance their empowerment. These reviews outline gaps in evidence regarding effective ways to support different groups of adolescent girls in Africa.

Spotlights

Four spotlights in the report provide further insight into key issues concerning adolescent girls' empowerment. The first illuminates gaps in the measurement of adolescent girls' empowerment. The second presents descriptive evidence from impact evaluations on vulnerable adolescent girls' empowerment. The third provides guidance on how to ensure quality implementation of safe spaces. The fourth discusses the political economy of adolescent girls' empowerment.

Policy guidance

The report concludes with evidence-based recommendations for policy makers, practitioners, and researchers with the intention that these recommendations will drive further dialogue and collaboration to improve the lives of adolescent girls in Africa and beyond.

Qualitative insights

Throughout, the report draws on qualitative insights from extensive consultations with adolescent girls, policy makers, and practitioners.

Note

1. Throughout the report, "Africa" refers to the 48 countries included in the World Bank's regional classification for Sub-Saharan Africa. For details, see <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups>.

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Africa stands at a crossroads, with its future prosperity hinging on the policy and investment decisions it makes today. The continent has an opportunity to shape the trajectories of generations to come by investing in the success of a pivotal population: its adolescent girls. With over 145 million adolescent girls calling Africa home, the potential for transformative change is immense. Yet challenges persist: from high rates of child marriage to limited educational opportunities. Over half of African girls ages 15 to 19 are out of school or married or have children. How can African countries overcome these challenges to ensure that adolescent girls enter adulthood empowered to thrive?

Pathways to Prosperity for Adolescent Girls in Africa offers a groundbreaking road map for change. This landmark report

- **Outlines concrete, actionable policy recommendations;**
- **Provides a comprehensive review of evidence-based interventions;**
- **Presents a data-driven categorization of African countries to guide investments in adolescent girls;** and
- **Introduces an innovative framework** for understanding and measuring adolescent girls' empowerment.

Drawing on extensive research and consultations with adolescent girls, policy makers, and practitioners, this report reveals that investing in adolescent girls can yield a tenfold return in economic impact. It outlines six key areas for targeted action: building human capital, enhancing economic success, focusing on the most vulnerable girls, adopting a holistic approach, addressing data and evidence gaps, and mobilizing diverse stakeholders.

Whether you are a policy maker, researcher, development practitioner, or advocate, this report will equip you with the knowledge and tools to drive meaningful change. Discover how empowering adolescent girls can transform individual lives and African economies. Join the movement to secure a brighter future for Africa's adolescent girls and nations alike. The time for action is now.



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