



Achieving Gender Equality by 2030: Putting Adolescents at the Center of the Agenda

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INTRODUCTION

Today, the world is home to the largest group of adolescents and youth 10–24 years of age, in history. In many ways this is good news—one of the greatest legacies of the Millennium Development Goals is the reduction in infant and child mortality worldwide from 12.7 per 1000 in 1990 to 5.9 in 2015.¹ This, paired with a comparable birth rate over the same 30-year period, has led to a current population of 1.8 billion young people worldwide, 86 percent of whom live in low- and middle-income countries.

This population has the potential to be a global demographic dividend, a term coined by economists Bloom and Canning at Harvard University to refer to the boost in economic growth that can result from changes in a nation's age structure. As fertility rates decrease, a country's working-age population grows relative to its younger dependent population. With more people in the labor force and fewer children to support, a country has a window of opportunity for rapid economic growth if the right social and economic investments and policies are made in health, education, governance, and the economy.²

Unfortunately, the current global adolescent population faces steep challenges that threaten its developmental and economic potential. Crushing poverty and a dearth of opportunities constrain both individual and national development. Therefore, to realize the demographic dividend that these young people represent, we need to expand expected global investments beyond a child's first three years of life. Bundy, et al. have proposed two investment packages that would carry the developmental gains made in a child's first 1,000 days through the next 7,000 days (to age 21).³ The first package focuses on improving the diet and physical health (e.g., deworming, tetanus, and HPV vaccines, oral health, and vision screening) for young people ages 5–14. The second, geared towards adolescents ages 10–19, adds health services, sexual and life skills education, and mental health counseling and education.

We also need to address gender inequalities and rigid gender expectations that limit the futures of many of the world's young people. The United Nations (UN) recognizes this need and has included it as part of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empowerment for all girls and women by 2030.

However, if SDG 5 is to be achieved by 2030, we cannot focus on girls and women alone. As men and women are not independent of each other, it is crucial that boys and men be included in efforts to promote gender equality and empowerment. Furthermore, we must actively engage girls and boys at the onset of adolescence to increase total social inclusion and produce generational change.

In an effort to close this gap, the Global Early Adolescent Study at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health teamed up with the Young Lives Study at the University of Oxford to convene an invitational conference of global leaders from 13 countries and diverse professional backgrounds (see appendix A) at the Rockefeller Conference Centre in Bellagio, Italy, in May 2018. The *Bellagio Working Group on Gender Equality* (Bellagio Working Group for short) outlined a set of recommendations for research, policy, and programming that, if implemented, would increase the likelihood of achieving SDG 5 by 2030.

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SDG 5 AND THE STATE OF ADOLESCENCE

Today, 27 percent of the world's population is comprised of young people between 10 and 24 years of age. Major social forces affecting this group include migration (both rural-to-urban and international), globalization, the rising priority of education, the later age of marriage, and smaller family sizes. Each of these factors has implications for gender equality worldwide.

Research and the media often focus on how these factors affect young women. Currently, 27 percent of adolescent girls worldwide are married by age 18, two million births annually are to girls under the age of 15, and girls' secondary school education still lags behind boys (56 percent to 63 percent).

Statistics like those above helped drive the targets set by the UN for SDG 5. The goal, in full, establishes the following criteria to be achieved by 2030:

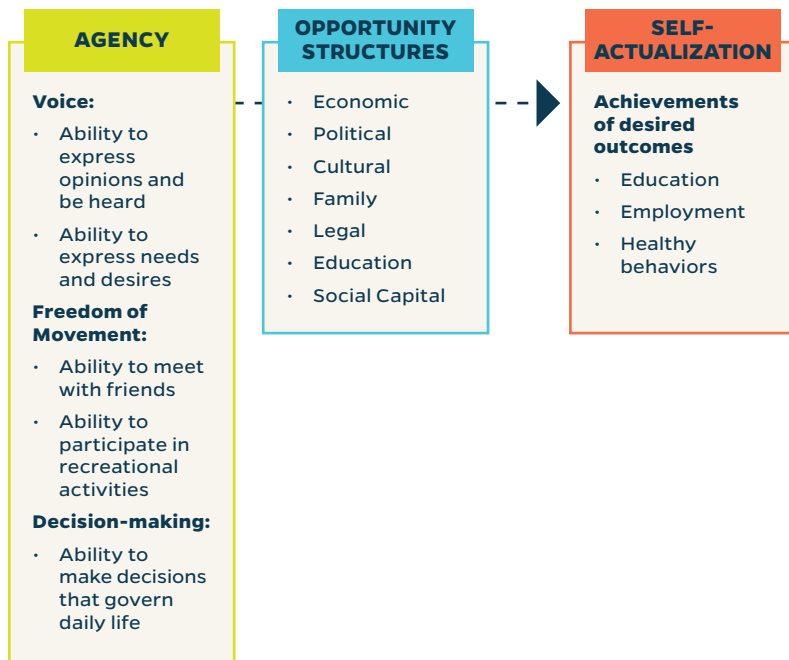
- End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.
- Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.
- Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation.
- Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.
- Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life.
- Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the outcome documents of their review conferences.
- Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance, and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.
- Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.
- Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

Nevertheless, we cannot achieve a gender-equitable world by ignoring half of its occupants. The current indicators for monitoring SDG 5 are less about achieving gender equality and more about improving women's health. As currently crafted, boys and men are excluded from the objective yet are critical if we really want to achieve the SDGs. As the UN itself has noted, "Sensitizing/socializing boys/men to gender-equitable relationships can help men adjust to changes in previously clear divisions of labor and responsibilities, resulting in changes in family relations."⁶

BELLAGIO WORKING GROUP OBJECTIVES

- Craft a research agenda that would advance a global understanding of the factors that impede and promote gender equality among adolescents. The agenda should address research gaps in key issues in adolescent gender equality in particular.
- Develop evidence-based global and national policy and programmatic agendas to inform country-level programming and policy priorities related to SDG 5.

GEAS CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR EMPOWERMENT AMONG ADOLESCENTS (BLUM 2018)



DEFINING TERMS

SDG 5 refers to both *gender* and *empowerment*, but what do these terms mean and how are they used? For the purpose of this report, we define gender and empowerment as follows:

GENDER: We use gender to describe a social construction that reflects cultural beliefs and expressions of what boys and girls, as well as men and women, are expected to do. In turn, these manifest behaviorally (what some refer to as “doing gender”), which reinforce or challenge communal norms. Gender is essentially relational in that we receive behavioral cues from those around us, while our own interactions sway the behaviors and responses of others. Gender is also influenced by place, time, and social conditions. As Kågesten et. al. explain: “At the root of many gender inequalities are gender norms that prescribe different status, power, and opportunities to girls and boys according to culturally appropriate versions of masculinities and femininities.”⁴

ADOLESCENT EMPOWERMENT:

We adopt the World Bank definition of empowerment as “the concept of enhancing an individual’s or group’s capacity to make effective choices; that is, to make choices and then transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes.”⁵ As such, there are two key dimensions: agency and opportunity. Agency is individual. For adolescents, it is reflected primarily in voice, decision-making, and freedom of movement. Opportunity is structural. It includes access to education, family and community supports, health and social services, and economic and political structures that together will help an individual to achieve his or her goals. Without opportunity, agency does not equal empowerment.

THE UN ALSO OUTLINES THE FOLLOWING INDICATORS FOR ASSESSING PROGRESS TOWARD SDG 5:

- ▶ Proportion subjected to intimate partner violence
- ▶ Proportion subjected to sexual violence
- ▶ Percent married or in union before age 15/18
- ▶ Percent who have undergone female genital cutting
- ▶ Time spent in unpaid domestic and care work
- ▶ Proportion of seats held by women in parliaments/ government
- ▶ Proportion of women in managerial positions
- ▶ Proportion who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relationships, contraceptive use, and reproductive health care
- ▶ Number of countries with laws/regulations guaranteeing full and equal access to women and men age 15 years and older to sexual and reproductive health care, information, and education

To promote real change in gender equality, we also need to look not just at the proximal drivers of inequalities, like those outlined by the UN, but also at subtle or even hidden drivers of bias. This can be seen when we look at youth migration through a gender lens. Both young men and women are increasingly moving from rural to urban areas in search of and competing for scarce education and job opportunities that too few will access. As such, dominance (whether by gender, age, or strength) may equate with survival in a context of severely constrained resources. How do urbanization, migration, poverty, and intergenerational disadvantage drive gender inequalities? What do we know, and what do we need to know, about these interrelationships? For example, are boys leaving school earlier than girls in low-resource settings to get a jump on the job market?⁷

Likewise, our understanding of context needs to extend beyond poverty to other environmental and ecological factors, such as climate change. For instance, when the highly successful Population Council program in the Amhara region of Ethiopia, Berhane Herwan, was replicated in the Tabora region of Tanzania, Erulkar hypothesized that a drought triggered economic instability and subsequently derailed the gender norm change impact of the program. It compelled parents to make marital decisions for their daughters they otherwise would not have chosen.⁸ In India, Duflo has demonstrated that in times of drought, the mortality rate for girls exceeds that of boys.⁹ In other countries, in times of economic distress and drought, witch hunts, nearly always targeted at older women, are twice as prevalent than in normal years.¹⁰ How do we account for such exigencies in our programs and policies?

The Young Lives Study, showed education to be a great gender leveler.¹¹ Baird and colleagues have also demonstrated that in Malawi, cash transfer programs can positively impact school retention for girls.¹² Nevertheless, advances in gender equality obtained through education disappeared when young people entered the workforce. Many of the limited opportunities still go to boys in those cases. What will ensure that the gains achieved in universal primary and secondary education are not lost in work and family transitions?

These are the types of questions we must better understand if we want to maintain the positive impacts of school-based interventions and achieve sustained gender equality. To realize the vision of SDG 5 the field needs two agendas: one research-driven, that addresses these types of questions, and one program-focused, that builds upon a generation of programming. To be effective, such agendas need to be clear, specific, achievable, and reflect the realities that many young people—especially those living in the poorest corners of their countries—face as they come of age.

THE ARGUMENT FOR A LIFE COURSE FRAMEWORK

To build upon the gains achieved in childhood, the Bellagio Working Group argues that it is critical to ground both our research and programmatic agendas in a life course framework. As workshop participant Perna Banati of UNICEF's Innocenti Centre succinctly stated, "A life course perspective would help recalibrate the planning of interventions for specific age groups and enhance the potential impact of development programming."¹³

WHAT IS A LIFE COURSE FRAMEWORK?

Life trajectories, transitions, events, and turning points drive life course frameworks. Life trajectory refers to the pathway of progression through the aging process. The individual life course is made up of many interdependent trajectories, including work, family, and education, that encompass life events and transitions. These are considered within the larger trajectory, which gives them a clear meaning. Sensitive periods are times within the life span when there is a heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli. These periods are particularly conducive to programmatic interventions, and evidence indicates that critical periods exist in early childhood and adolescence.¹⁴

TIMING

A few key points emerge from life course literature that are particularly relevant for adolescents. First, timing matters. Adolescence can be seen as a unique period of life, with risks and opportunities that require particular attention. Evidence from neuroscience identifies the plasticity of the adolescent brain and the development of the prefrontal cortex as a particular time for developing behavioral control and social cognitive skills.¹⁵ Furthermore, a study by Janacek analyzed data from people ranging from 4 to 85 years of age, and it concluded that skill development is more impactful in early adolescence than later in life.¹⁶

Life course and longitudinal research also highlight gender differences that emerge at particular points in time interact with other forms of disadvantage, and accumulate. For example, the *2016 State of World Population Report* gives a compelling example of how grossly two paths for the same girl can diverge, and how accumulated disadvantages in one scenario can be overcome in the other when support is introduced at an early age.¹⁷

SCENARIO 1

Although her parents would like all their children to attend secondary school, they realize this may not be possible due to expenses for books, uniforms, and related items. Because they believe her brothers will have better employment prospects, they prioritize their sons' education over their daughter's.

She leaves school after primary education and has fewer opportunities to access safe spaces outside the home or connect with peers.

Having left school, she marries a 20-year-old man from a nearby village in an arranged marriage. Her parents are keen on the match because the groom's family is not asking for a dowry, which will ease the financial burden on her family.

With pressure from her in-laws to have children shortly after marriage, she gives birth to her first child. The pregnancy is difficult and takes a toll on her health.

She gives birth to her second child.

She works occasionally as an unskilled laborer to help support her family, but work is inconsistent because of her household responsibilities.

She is pregnant with her third child and wants to discuss birth control options with her husband, but he expresses disapproval. Worried that he may become violent, she does not bring it up again.

She is now a mother to three children and household finances are tight, just as they were in her parents' house when she was a child. Her oldest child, a girl, attends primary school. She hopes she will be able to give her daughter the continued education she was unable to have. But she is also worried that this will be impossible, both because of money and because her household will increasingly rely on their daughter to help with the household chores and sibling childcare.

AGE

10

Because of a conditional cash transfer (CCT) program, the girl's parents have a financial incentive to make sure she attends school regularly, while the family can use the extra money for food and school supplies. She learns about a competitive secondary-school scholarship offered to her village, and she studies hard for the exams. She attends a girls' community program where she learns about reproductive health, decision-making, and life skills.

12

She qualifies for the scholarship and progresses to secondary school.

15

She continues to build peer support and gain agency.

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She completes secondary school and finds work as a data-entry clerk in a nearby town. Acting on a coworker's advice, she opens a bank account and begins making regular deposits.

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With family approval, she chooses to marry a 23-year-old man from a nearby village. Partly due to the income she brings in, she feels confident in expressing her opinion and making household decisions. Because of the comprehensive sex education, she received as a young adolescent she is able to confidently discuss delaying childbearing with her husband and counter family pressure to have her first child immediately after getting married. She practices contraception to delay her first pregnancy until she and her husband are more acquainted and finances are more secure.

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She gives birth to her first child. She takes some time off work to care for the baby but plans to return. She and her husband would like another baby but decide to wait another 2-3 years.

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Now working again, she hopes to be able to provide her daughter with an education that is at least as good as the one she had.

SCENARIO 2

The above scenarios are illustrative, but they are shaped by real-life factors and data. Time-use research from Ethiopia shows that the care burden for girls begins in early adolescent years. By the time they are age 13, girls do three hours of work in a typical day, compared to two hours for boys.¹⁸ In other countries, this disparity appears in a variety of ways. In Cambodia, 30 percent more time spent on housework by women than men; in Guinea, the difference is six to one. In Iraq, women spend 10 times more time on child care than men.¹⁹ Additionally Young Lives has shown that as children enter adolescence, the types of work they do are heavily gendered—girls doing more domestic and boys more productive work—setting the scripts for later life employment expectations.²⁰

CROSS-DEVELOPMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Additionally, life course frameworks help identify how circumstances experienced in one phase of life impact later phases. Evidence shows that early childhood experiences can predict adolescent outcomes. For example, work by Costello and others has demonstrated that low birthweight predicts depression in adolescent girls.²¹ Similarly, experiences during adolescence can predict later life outcomes. The work of Falconi et al. has proven that early adolescence is a sensitive developmental period for males, finding that stressors experienced by age 10–14 are more strongly related to a shorter life span than those before or after this age.²²

It is also important to note that later-phase consequences might be linked across different domains of life. For example, the Young Lives Study identified the association between children's height at age 12 and cognitive outcomes during later adolescence.²³ Specifically, in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam, an increase of one standard deviation in early height-for-age predicted an increase of cognitive skills by 6–17 percent during

later adolescence. Evidence supports the idea that relationships between health and education are bidirectional over time, with good health promoting better learning, and a quality education promoting better health. Thus, policy approaches that address one particular sector may also impact other dimensions of a young person's life. In particular, education, child marriage, and reproductive health are closely intertwined.²⁴ One compelling example from the World Bank found that for every year a girl remains in secondary school, her risk of becoming pregnant declines by 7 percent.²⁵

ACCUMULATION OF DISADVANTAGE AND RECOVERY

Relatedly, the impact of stressors on an individual are cumulative, making catch-up progressively more difficult once the person falls behind. For example, in Vietnam, half of those in the bottom quartile of mathematics scores at age 12 had left school by age 15, further limiting their life chances.²⁶

Disadvantage can also be transmitted inter-generationally, often through the educational or health status of the mother. However, because of developmental “plasticity” (the continuing development of the brain at least until age 24 years), repair and catch-up is possible. Positive impact observed in one age group can stem from intervention at an earlier age.

As such, for those who had a healthy start, adolescence can present an opportunity to consolidate earlier investments; on the other hand, for those born into disadvantage, it can prove to be a time to redress gaps and overcome adversities experienced earlier in life. This is why the World Health Organization refers to adolescence as “a second chance in the second decade.”²⁷ A notable example is the study by Benny et al.²⁸ that found adult women who had been exposed to famine as adolescents were significantly more likely to be stunted than even those similarly exposed in early childhood.

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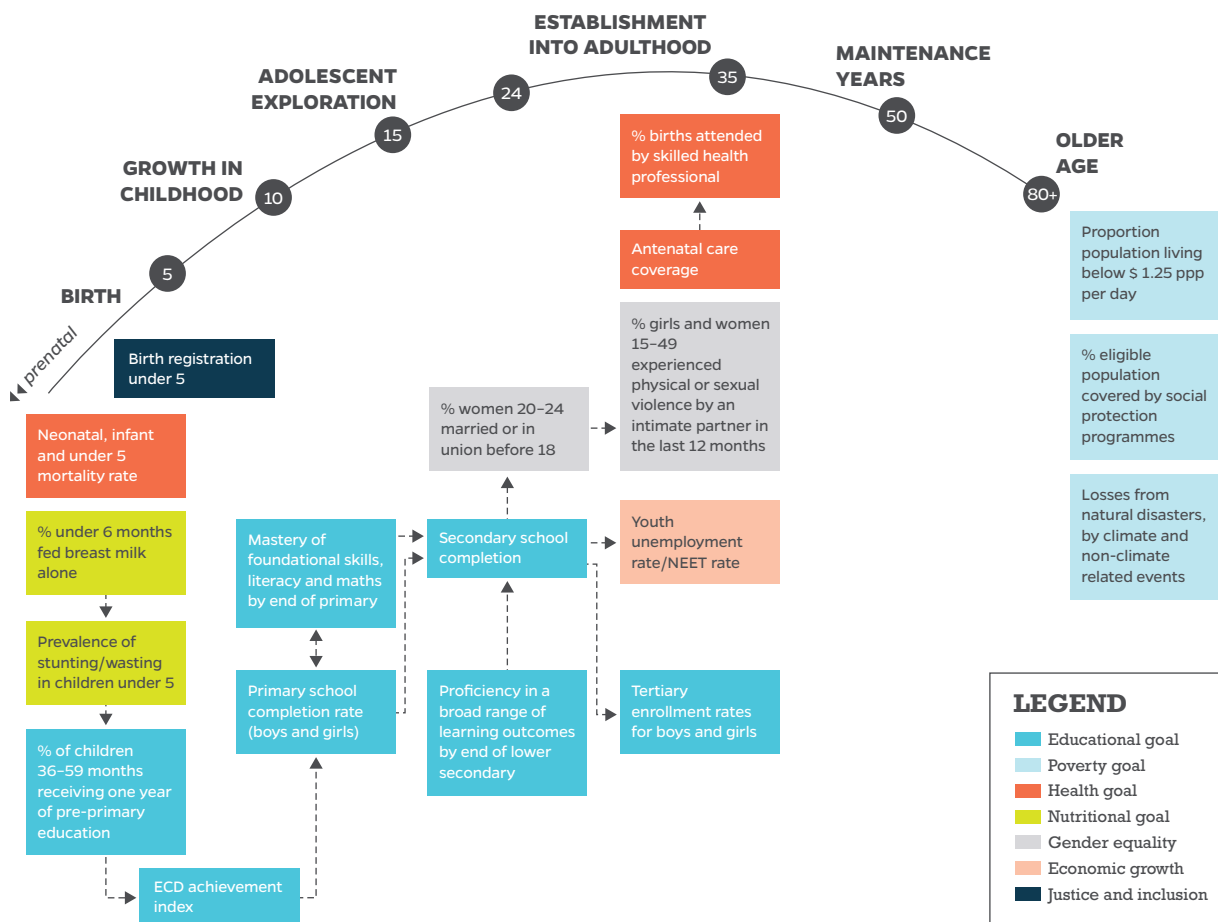
Another critical concept inherent in the life course approach is that of stability and change during adolescence. Bornstein, from the US National Institutes of Health, has underscored that while certain traits are stable across development, puberty is a time of significant instability, and as such there are both continuities and discontinuities from childhood that result from maturation and changes in social context.²⁹ Boyden, the lead researcher from the Young Lives Study, also noted that the capacity to recover during adolescence is critical to understanding life trajectories and opportunities for intervention.³⁰

SIGNIFICANCE OF A LIFE COURSE FRAMEWORK FOR ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY

Life course trajectories, turning points, events, and transitions are not reflected in the SDGs. The SDG measurement framework, while crucial to monitoring progress, is not sufficient for understanding extended effects. SDG indicators follow progress of the indicators cross-sectionally rather than following people’s lives. As such, indicators for the SDGs cannot tell us about critical periods. The current structure limits assessment of complementarities between seemingly diverse interventions or the cumulative benefits of an intervention at one age group in subsequent ages. It also cannot tell us where interventions could minimize loss to investments made earlier in the life course, nor can we detect the impact of interventions today on future well-being.

THE BELLAGIO WORKING GROUP’S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY

FIGURE 1: LINKING SDG INDICATORS TO A LIFE COURSE FRAMEWORK
(MODIFIED FROM BANATI IN VERMA AND PETERSEN, 2018)



As we have explored, early adolescence is a critical period for gender norms influence. Home and school experiences set a life course trajectory for future work and opportunities. So too, gender norm attitudes and beliefs appear to solidify by age 15 or 16, making adolescence and especially early adolescence truly a *second chance in the second decade*. We recognize that the goal of gender equality and empowerment for all by 2030 will not occur on its own. Rather, it will require attitudinal, behavioral, and structural changes focused on the adolescent years. It will also require the vigilance of the global community to assure that the steps needed to reach the goal are being taken. By investing in research and programs that promote adolescent health and development, we can realize and harness the potential of this demographic dividend.

In order to actively achieve this goal, the Bellagio Working Group recommends expanding the indicators the UN has outlined for SDG 5 (listed on page 3) to include:

INDICATOR	IMPORTANCE
▶ Percent completing secondary school by sex	▶ Achieve universal secondary education and graduation for all boys and girls. Education has been shown to significantly increase gender equality.
▶ Percent of schools with comprehensive sex education (CSE)	▶ CSE has been shown to effectively provide skills and resources that help people to control their reproductive futures.
▶ Percent of adolescents who feel safe in their neighborhood by age and sex	▶ Safety and security are essential for young people to be able to have experiences that allow for healthy development.
▶ Percent of adolescents who feel they can ask for help when needed	▶ Voice is a critical component of empowerment, and seeking help when needed enhances safety and security.
▶ Percent of adolescents with access to family planning services by age, sex and marital status ▶ Percent of adolescents with depression by age and sex ▶ Percent of adolescents with iron-deficiency anemia by age and sex	▶ Access to family planning services helps people to control their reproductive future and to decide if and when to have children. ▶ There is growing evidence globally that mental health is one of the greatest needs of young people. ▶ Iron-deficiency anemia affects both the adolescent’s growth and ability to learn. It impairs their children as well.
▶ Percent of adolescents married on or before age 15 by sex ▶ Percent married between ages 16 and 18 years by sex	▶ Child marriage effectively ends education, is a form of child abuse, and eliminates the opportunity for women to control their reproduction.

There is also a need to further study national policies that both promote and hinder gender equality, specifically when they impact the adolescent population. The Bellagio Working Group recommends focusing on the following ten topics in particular:

RESEARCH PRIORITIES	SPECIFIC FOCUS
Drivers of child marriage, particularly among children 15 and younger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The role of coercion into marriage ▶ The protective role of social networks
Unpaid work and its consequences	Consequences for: early marriage, early school leaving, future employment
Female genital cutting/mutilation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Men's attitudes towards FGM ▶ The relationships between sexual well-being and FGM ▶ Coercion, social norms, and FGM ▶ Trend estimations at the country level
Contraceptive decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The meaning of "choice" in adolescence ▶ Impacts of laws and policies related to contraceptive access by adolescents
Gender-based violence	Improved estimates of gender-based violence (perpetration and victimization) by sex
Expanded impact evaluation of interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Understanding processes of recovery and resilience in adolescence ▶ Improved understanding of the social contexts in the lives of low-income adolescents and the experiences of gender inequalities.
Critical transitions in adolescence and their relationships to health and social outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Care burden ▶ Menarche ▶ Fertility
Replication research to understand the processes of taking effective programs to scale	Replication of programs with low-cost alternatives that can be scaled
Quality assessment of adolescent services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Adolescent health services delivery ▶ Sex education
Evaluation of laws and policies that advance gender equality	Impact evaluation of laws related to the following to identify what works: child marriage, female genital cutting, gender-based violence, universal secondary education

MONITORING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SDG 5 IN ADOLESCENTS

To monitor the improvements that will lead to achieving SDG 5, the Bellagio Working Group recommends that:

- **The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and other international data monitoring systems, like UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, include adolescents, both boys and girls, starting at the age of 10.** Currently, the DHS excludes the younger half of adolescents from direct data collection. Nevertheless, this group is maturing earlier than previous generations while facing increasing challenges.
- **An international agency or NGO monitor our proposed adolescent indicators for SDG 5.** Without a deliberate monitoring system in place, it is less likely that these indicators will be measured. What is not measured is not priority.

CONCLUSION

There have been dramatic changes in both opportunities and challenges for young people over the last generation. Today, fewer are marrying as children than 25 years ago, more boys and girls are in school in most parts of the world, and the gender gap in education is narrowing. But the challenges are equally great. More young people than ever before are migrating to cities in search of limited opportunity. As a result, the number of cities with populations over 1 million, as well as the number of mega-cities with populations over 10 million, has swelled. Consequently, risks to adolescent health due to urban living conditions and behavior are greater today. This poverty diminishes the opportunity for nations to realize their demographic dividend. Therefore, it is imperative to build a more gender-equal world now and create opportunities that will allow countries to harness all of its human resources to realize their potential.

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