

GIRLS CONNECT TO SHAPE THE EU-AFRICA PARTNERSHIP

EUROPEAN WEEK OF
ACTION FOR
GIRLS

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE GIRL 2020



In 2020 more than 300 million girls under the age of 18 live in Africa, and this number will increase by 20% by 2030.¹ Girls represent not only the future of the continent, they have an essential role to play in its present.

On 9 March 2020, the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) published their Joint Communication Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa. This document will help frame the discussion between European and African Heads of States during the 6th African Union (AU)-EU Summit, and will contribute to redefining the partnership between the EU and Africa around common priorities.

While we welcome the mention of women and youth as key actors in the EU's Joint Communication, it is imperative that women and youth are also mainstreamed throughout the future partnership between Africa and the EU, as they are key driving forces of sustainable development and peace. Girls' voices and their priorities in particular must be included in the future AU-EU partnership. Indeed, girls face distinct challenges based on their age and gender and their needs often fall through the cracks. The current Joint Communication falls short of responding to their needs and challenges.

Moreover, girls are disproportionately affected by the current COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated that 1.54 billion children and youth are currently out of school because of COVID-19-related closures, including nearly 743 million girls. Over 111 million of these girls are living in the world's least developed countries, including in sub-Saharan Africa, where getting an education is already a struggle.² The COVID-19 pandemic is also likely to exacerbate burdens of unpaid care and domestic work on girls. In addition, quarantine measures are putting girls at heightened risk of violence at home by family members and are also limiting girls' access to essential healthcare services.

This means that it has never been more important for the EU to hardwire legally binding targets for spending on gender equality into its next 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, which would ensure stronger monitoring and evaluation, and make certain that the EU's commitment to gender equality extends beyond a box-checking exercise. The Council, Commission and Parliament should agree to binding gender targets requiring 85% of EU programs to have gender equality as either a significant or principal objective (in line with the DAC marker G1 and G2, respectively).

We strongly encourage the EU and the AU to hear girls' concerns and needs as well as their proposed solutions by supporting their meaningful participation in shaping the EU-AU partnership. It is not possible to effectively tackle issues affecting girls, without them being at the centre of decision-making.

In 2020, the **European Week of Action for Girls (EWAG)** will take place ahead of the 6th AU-EU Summit, providing a great platform for girls to speak out about how the EU-Africa partnership can reflect their aspirations and unlock their potential. It is crucial that the EU strategy enables dialogue between both regions, allowing for mutual learning and joint and coordinated actions, especially on issues that affect girls and young women both in the EU and the AU - such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). This paper introduces messages and recommendations that reflect girls' aspirations in the following four key areas.

¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). World Population Prospects 2019, custom data acquired via website: <https://population.un.org/wpp/DataQuery/>

² Plan International, <https://plan-international.org/emergencies/covid-19-faqs-girls-women>

VIOLENCE AND HARMFUL PRACTICES: GIRLS MUST BE FREE FROM HARM

Every girl has the right to live a life free from any form of violence and harm and grow up in a safe, peaceful and enabling environment where she can fully exercise her rights.

However, four in ten women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa are married before the age of 18.³ Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) denies girls their fundamental rights to health, safety, and education: it deprives girls of their childhood. Girls who are married before the age of 18 are less likely to remain in school, more likely to become pregnant in adolescence and to experience domestic violence. In these times of economic hardship and health crisis, girls face heightened risks to be forced into marriage as a result of negative coping mechanisms. A UNFPA study showed that an additional 13 million child marriages that could have been averted worldwide may occur over the next decade due to the current COVID-19-related disruptions in programmes on early and forced marriage.⁴

It is estimated that at least 200 million women from 31 countries⁵ (27 of which are in Africa) are living with the consequences of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and girls below 14 years old represent at least 44 million of the total figure. Although FGM can be carried out at various ages, it is most commonly practiced on girls between the ages of 0 to 15 years. Consequences of this practice often include long term physical and psychological trauma, as well as being a prerequisite for other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) such as child, early and forced marriage. UNFPA estimated that due to COVID-19-related disruption in programmes on FGM prevention, an additional 2 million girls will be subjected to FGM by 2030,⁶ on top of the 68 million already previously estimated.⁷

One in four African children are living in conflict, or 170 million, the largest absolute number in the world.⁸ Girls living in conflict and humanitarian settings are at a higher risk of experiencing SGBV, both because it is used as a weapon of war, and as a result of precarious and unsafe living conditions. This is particularly the case of girls refugees and internally displaced (IDPs). While addressing SGBV is paramount to breaking the negative cycle of protracted conflicts, little attention is given to preventing it and responding to matters such as CEFM, FGM or sexual violence against girls. In particular, the lack of age and gender disaggregated data in conflict settings prevent us from understanding the level and nature of girls' specific needs that would ensure appropriate decision-making from the EU and African governments.

To address these challenges, we recommend that the EU-Africa strategy and its implementation:

- 1. Ensure that the international and regional commitments (at African and European level) to end harmful practices and GBV are fully respected and translated into concrete actions** within the EU-Africa partnership, in line with the political commitments on gender equality, including through goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Beijing Platform of Action and the outcomes of their review conferences.
- 2. Take extra steps to tackle harmful practices**, including increased investment in critical youth-centred support and services for survivors of FGM; Urgently increase resources and investment to end FGM and CEFM as well as to support women and girls affected by these harmful practices.
- 3. Give special attention to preventing and responding to SGBV against girls**, taking a holistic approach, in the strengthened EU-Africa cooperation on peace and security through concrete mutual commitments. This includes allocating funding to initiatives aiming at preventing and responding to SGBV in humanitarian and peacebuilding interventions, ensuring a systematic integration of a SGBV response in every humanitarian and peacebuilding intervention and support to armed forces, as well as providing child and youth-friendly protection services, including psychosocial services, that address the specific needs of girls affected by violence.

³ https://rightbyher.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FINAL_DSW-RBH-Key-Findings-WEB.pdf

⁴ UNFPA Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage: <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-pandemic-family-planning-and-ending-gender-based-violence-female-genital>

⁵ However, recent data shows evidence of FGM being present in over 90 countries worldwide, see https://www.endfgm.eu/editor/files/2020/03/FGM_Global_-_ON-LINE_PDF_VERSION_-_06_1.pdf

⁶ <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/covid-19-disrupting-sdg-53-eliminating-female-genital-mutilation>

⁷ <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/bending-curve-fgm-trends-we-aim-change>

⁸ Save the Children, [Stop the War on Children 2020: Gender matters](https://www.savethechildren.org/global/stop-the-war-on-children-2020-gender-matters)

HEALTH AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Every girl has the right to lead a healthy and self-determined life. Still, too often girls face multiple barriers preventing them from accessing health services which meet their specific needs.

Girls are disproportionately affected by specific diseases: new HIV infections among young women (aged 15–24 years) are 44% higher than among boys.⁹ In addition, in sub-Saharan Africa, 7 in 10 girls do not have comprehensive knowledge about HIV.¹⁰

Moreover, girls face several obstacles to see their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) respected and fulfilled: due to entrenched gender norms and stereotypes, girls are often denied the right to exert control over their bodies and do not have a say in important decisions such as if, when and whom to marry or whether and when to have children. Girls also lack access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). This is, however, an important aspect of SRHR as it gives the possibility to young people, and in particular girls, to better understand their bodies and their rights, and to counter harmful gender norms and stereotypes. Age-appropriate CSE is key to building girls' skills to form healthy, equal, nurturing and safe relationships, free from discrimination, coercion and gender-based violence.

However, too often, health services, including for SRHR, are not adequate and accessible for girls, who are stigmatised and can face discrimination, violence and coercion. When girls have access to health services that can meet their specific needs, they can make choices, exert control over their bodies and exercise their right to health, being actors of positive change.

To address these challenges, we recommend that the EU-Africa strategy and its implementation:

1. **Promote universal access for girls to youth-friendly health services**, including SRHR, that are adapted, equitable, accessible, affordable and needs-based, including in conflict and humanitarian settings.
2. **Fight harmful gender norms and laws that prevent girls from accessing the health services they need to lead healthy and self-determined lives.**
3. Support African partner countries in responding to the COVID-19 crisis in a comprehensive manner, including through the **strengthening of health systems and universal access to SRHR as part of Universal Health Coverage (UHC).**



⁹ https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/20170720_Data_book_2017_en.pdf

¹⁰ Ibid.

EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Education is one of the most powerful means to achieve gender equality, to acquire literacy as well as life-skills, and to encourage active civic engagement for girls. Across Africa, 9 million girls between the ages of 6 and 11 will never go to school at all.¹¹ During conflicts and crises, girls' right to education is severely affected: they are almost 2.5 times more likely to be out of primary school, and nearly 90% more likely to be out of secondary school than their counterparts in countries not affected by conflict.¹² Girls who do not go to school face a heightened risk of specific barriers such as exposure to child marriage and early pregnancy, and time poverty due to increasing responsibility for unpaid care work.

In addition, formal and non-formal education, including technical and vocational education and training, supports young women's successful transition into the labour market. The global alliance 'Decent Jobs for Youth'¹³ highlights that in sub-Saharan Africa there are currently 9 million unemployed young people, and 20% of young people are neither in employment, education nor training (NEETs). Girls face specific obstacles, compounded as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as unequal care responsibilities, unequal access to education and training, occupational segregation, GBV, financial exclusion, and the digital gender gap, which hamper their economic empowerment. This perpetuates the negative cycle of discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes which set the stage for economic and gender-based inequalities. On the other hand, emerging sectors such as the digital sector and the green economy provide new opportunities for young women's economic empowerment. Digital skills and green skills should be included in education and training, for girls and young women to benefit from and be drivers of these transformations, which are at the moment predominantly male-dominated sectors.

Fragile and emergency contexts further limit young women's access to economic opportunities and heighten the obstacles, as well as bringing new challenges such as trauma or security concerns that restrict girls' mobility. A lack of decent jobs and training opportunities may have a negative impact on their future, force them into unsafe, insecure and low paid work, and create further social instability.

To address these challenges, we recommend that the EU-Africa strategy and its implementation:

1. **Promote access to and completion of quality, inclusive education at all levels for all girls and young women, in safe learning environments**, including in conflict and crises settings
2. **Take measures to promote girls as drivers of the digital transformation and to address the digital gender divide**, which is as relevant as ever due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Promote digital skills and girls' participation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) subjects including by tackling occupational stereotypes and gender biases in curricula
3. **Support young women's economic empowerment, including in fragile and forced displacement settings, through quality, inclusive training programmes and skills development** (including green skills for a green economy), equal access to productive and financial resources for young women entrepreneurs, and by fighting discriminatory laws and practices and ensuring access to decent jobs and social protection.

¹¹ UNESCO Institute of Statistics: <http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/education-africa>

¹² UNESCO: [Humanitarian Aid for Education: Why It Matters and Why More is Needed](#), 2015, p. 3

¹³ <https://www.decentjobsforyouth.org/>

GIRLS' PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

Some of the most famous young activists changing the world today are girls younger than 18. 76% of girls and young women aged 15 to 25 are motivated to drive social and political change in their homes, communities and beyond.¹⁴ Their voices should be heard because it is their right, but also to ensure that decisions are fair, representative, and contribute to greater social justice.

However globally youth participation and representation in political processes and policy-making is quite low.¹⁵ This can be due to inadequate political representation, and at times meaningless child and youth engagement mechanisms that do not have a real impact on decision-making. For girls, negative social norms that discourage them from speaking their minds further hinder their engagement. On the other hand, they increasingly express their social and political engagement through protests, campaigns, movements, and youth organisations.

Africa is one of the most climate-sensitive areas of the planet and the current trends are exacerbating climate-related disasters. Due to their age and gender, girls are among the most affected by the climate crisis.¹⁶ However, they have proven their essential role in the global fight against climate change. Girl-led movements such as Fridays for the Future and the work of Vanessa Nakate, the Ugandan young climate activist, have shown the powerful addition of young women's voices to the political debate around the climate crisis. But their voices are still too scarce. The involvement of girls and young women is key to win the continent's fight against climate change.

In addition, girls have an essential role to play in peacebuilding efforts and as such should not be overlooked in the dominant Women, Peace and Security agenda. Lasting peace will not be achieved without involving the voices of those who are the hardest hit and who will bear the biggest burden of long-lasting consequences: youth, and in particular girls and young women. Systematically integrating the Women, Peace and Security agenda in conjunction with the Youth, Peace and Security agenda in the EU-Africa cooperation will be essential for fostering sustainable peace and development.

To address these challenges, we recommend that the EU-Africa strategy and its implementation:

- 1. Invest in the participation and political empowerment of girls and young women in all their diversity and in all settings.** More flexible funding of smaller amounts are especially important to support local movements, youth organisations and girls' rights activists, as well as building their capacity and leadership, and ensuring their safety offline and online
- 2. Support governments and local authorities to increase safe, inclusive and meaningful participation of girls in decision-making processes,** including on the COVID-19 response and climate-related processes, ensuring that girls in all their diversity are equally represented
- 3. Recognise, amplify and promote the voices of African youth, and in particular girls and young women, who play an important role in fostering long lasting peace in their communities;** Systematically integrate the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda in EU-Africa peace and security cooperation.

More on www.europeanweekofactionforgirls.org.

¹⁴ Taking the Lead report 2019: <https://plan-international.org/publications/taking-the-lead>

¹⁵ UN World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement 2015: <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wyr/2015/report.pdf>

¹⁶ https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/35/13

