

Formative Evaluation of Gender Transformative Programming through Investment in Adolescent Girls' Leadership in Eastern and Southern Africa



2023 | UNICEF EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA REGIONAL OFFICE

At this point in history, more than ever before, adolescent girls are a leading voice of change and action. They are demanding action and speaking up in their communities on issues from the climate crisis to prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. However, adolescent girls face a double discrimination based on their age and gender, and all too often their voices are not heard. Across Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA), adolescent girls are facing challenging circumstances and outcomes, as shown in the yellow box on the right. The reasons for this are complex and multi-faceted, with unequal gendered power dynamics at the root.

Responding to this context, UNICEF has made a commitment to place the rights, well-being and leadership of adolescent girls at the centre of their work, as outlined in the [Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy, 2022- 2025](#). The most recent [Gender Action Plan \(GAP\) 2022-2025](#) articulates an ambitious agenda to contribute to more **transformative change** for gender equality. Recognising this as an enhanced priority for UNICEF with a new organisational commitment and focus, the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO) commissioned SDDirect to conduct the formative evaluation, in 2023 to explore learning and good practice in relation to how current programming and practices are supporting adolescent girls' voice, agency and leadership as a core aspect of a gender transformative approach. The evaluation covers the period from 2018–2023 (beginning of GAP 2 to GAP 3), and examples a sample of countries from across the region.

- 63% of adolescent girls are out of school across the ESA region.
- Rates of child marriage are among the highest in the world.
- There is a birth rate of 107 per 1,000 girls aged 15-19, one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in the world.
- The region is the epicentre of the HIV epidemic and new HIV infections in adolescent girls are nearly six times higher than among adolescent boys.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected adolescent girls, including their financial security, education and wellbeing.

Source: [Girls' education | UNICEF](#), [UNAIDS Global AIDS Update 2022](#)

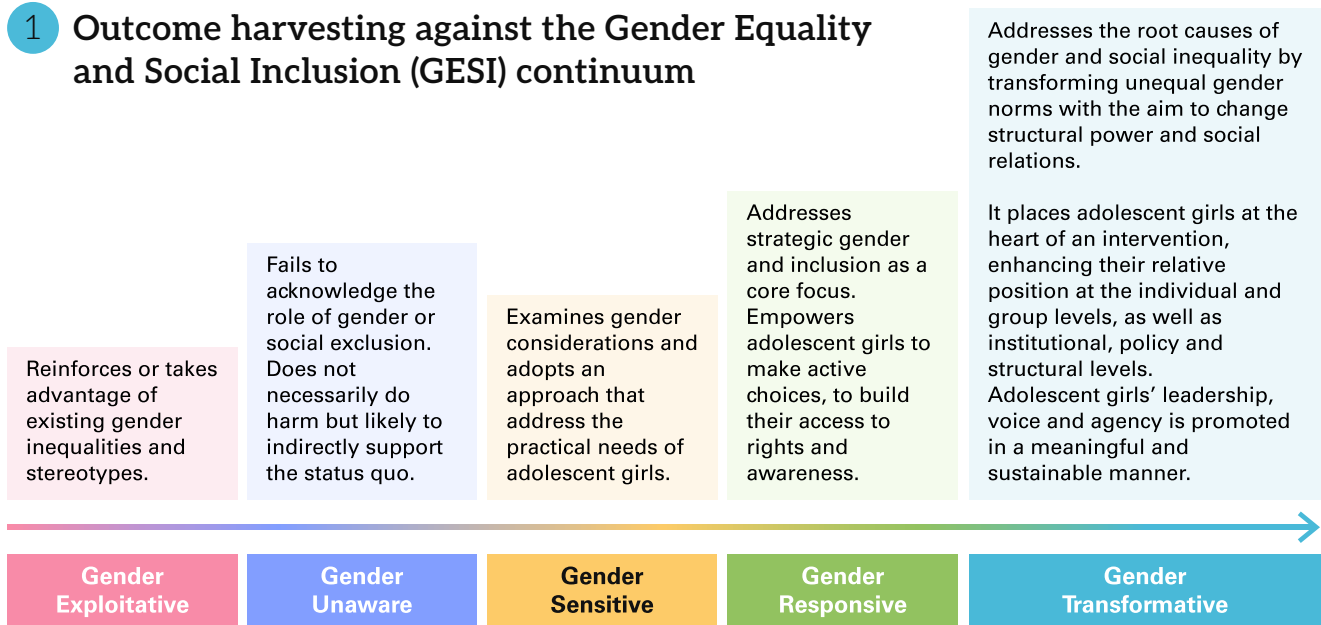
A **gender transformative approach** addresses the root causes of gender and social inequality by transforming unequal gender norms with the aim to change structural power and social relations.

It is underpinned by **intersectional analysis**, and places adolescent girls in their diversity at the heart of an intervention, enhancing their relative position at the individual and group levels, as well as institutional, policy and structural levels.

Methodology

The evaluation approach was based on two core approaches:

1 Outcome harvesting against the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) continuum



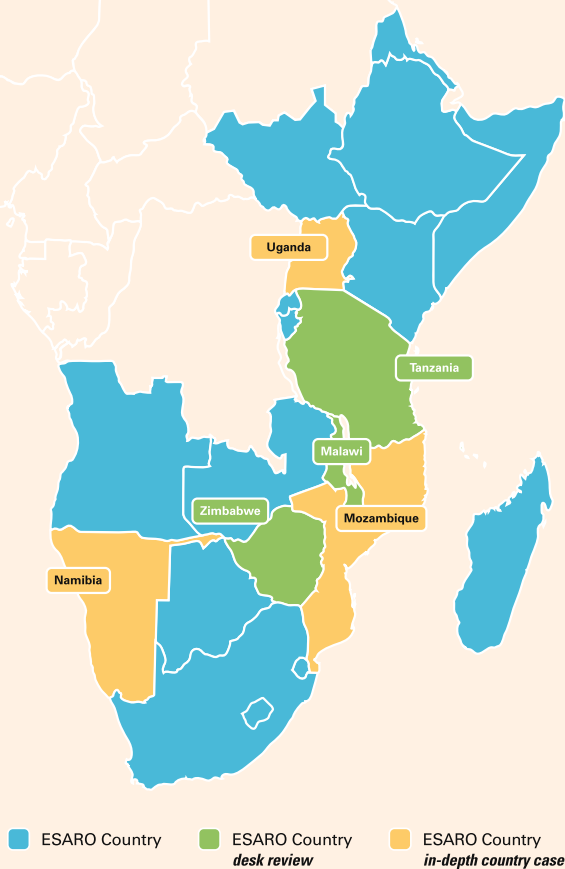
2 Participatory and youth friendly approaches:

- We engaged and trained 9 adolescent girls and 3 adolescent boys in the three country case studies who carried out interviews with their peers and supported the evaluation team with sensemaking and validation of findings.
- We formed a Regional Adolescent Advisory Group of 8 adolescent girls and 3 adolescent boys representing countries across the ESA region who met three times during the evaluation to act as a sounding board, and feed into the recommendations.
- We conducted participatory interviews and focus group discussions with young people in our case study countries.
- All of our data collection tools were adapted to be appropriate and accessible to a range of adolescent girls and boys. We used participatory and interactive tools to maximise their engagement.

Definitions of adolescent girls' voice, leadership and agency used by the evaluation are shown in the blue box to the right

- **Agency** is the ability to act or to choose what action to take and to exert control over their own life and circumstances.
- **Voice** is the ability to express thoughts, opinions and ideas and to be heard.
- **Leadership** involves empowering adolescent girls, building their self-esteem, self-efficacy and confidence to play active roles in shaping their lives and become agents of change in their communities.





Data Collection

Whilst the geographical coverage for the evaluation was all 21 countries in which UNICEF is working in the region, a sample of three countries were selected for in depth-country case studies (Mozambique, Namibia and Uganda) and three for desk-based reviews (Malawi, Tanzania and Zimbabwe), based on agreed criteria. The evaluation covered all UNICEF sectors, with a focus on adolescent girl-focused programming.



Findings and Conclusions

Overarching question

The evaluation found that all of the case study countries are addressing girls' voice, agency and leadership to differing degrees as part of their adolescent-focused programming. More examples were found of individual transformation rather than wider attitudinal or societal change, which is also needed for effective gender-transformative programming.

Linked to [Conclusion 1](#)

Relevance

- Many of the programmes reviewed were **designed to meet the needs of adolescent girls** and are **based on robust analysis, research, and surveys**.
- Programmes have **both reacted and changed thematically in response to emerging trends**.
- The evaluation found strongest evidence of adolescent girls being engaged in implementation and monitoring activities, with less evidence of their engagement in programme and policy design and evaluation.

Conclusion 1

Investing in adolescent girls' voice, leadership and agency. This approach has led to positive changes among individual adolescent girls in relation to their confidence, self-esteem and self-belief. This change has been more centred at the programme level, with less evidence emerging of how this has translated into changes affecting their lives outside of the programme, across the socio-ecological model. These strong outcomes at the individual level are indicative of the focus of the previous GAP 2 and there is strong potential for girl-intentioned programming to become more transformative over time with the full operationalisation of GAP3.

Projects and programmes are often designed by staff members, or centrally mandated, with limited opportunities for adolescents to meaningfully participate in their design.

Linked to [Conclusion 8](#)

Coherence

- ESARO and the COs programmes were found to be **aligned to global policies and commitments, government policy and legal frameworks**. More attention could be made on alignment to global policy commitments for girls with disabilities, and other forms of intersectional, structural marginalisation, where safe and appropriate to do so.
- Examples were found of **strong alignment of UNICEF's work with partners** including governments, other UN agencies and development partners.
- There is a strong potential to expand and strengthen partnerships with **girl-led and women-led organisations**. The transformational potential of **joint programmes has not yet been fully leveraged**.
- **Country office ambitions are still most often linked to 'gender mainstreaming' and 'gender sensitivity'** rather than 'gender transformation'. Whilst this does not come as a surprise since the goal of gender transformation has only been explicit in GAP 3 for a year, there is a strong potential for embedding a deeper focus and understanding of gender transformative change.

Linked to [Conclusion 2](#) [Conclusion 3](#)

Effectiveness

- There are promising examples of country offices employing a **range of different programmatic approaches** to contribute to gender transformative outcomes. At the individual level, these include mentorship, upskilling, and capacity building activities, along with safe spaces and school clubs. At an interpersonal level, programmes have developed peer-to-peer approaches, and (intergenerational, interpersonal) dialogues. Examples were found in some countries of work engaging men and boys in support of greater gender equality, fostering positive masculinities as part of a gender transformative approach.

Conclusion 2

Sustainability. UNICEF COs and Programmes are well aligned with government priorities, global frameworks, and UNICEF's strategic plans which supports sustainability. But there are capacity challenges among decision makers and lawmakers where UNICEF ESAR could do more to explicitly emphasise and situate this work within the context of gender transformation, and to engage them in a more sustainable and gender transformative way.

Conclusion 3

Coordination. At country level coordination between UNICEF, other UN agencies, national governments, and other key partners and donors, is supportive of and in line with country priorities. Additional opportunities exist to improve coordination and learning further through joint programmes and south-south partnerships, where promising practice is emerging, to support gender transformative programming.

Conclusion 4

Promising models and approaches are being implemented across different sectors to contribute to gender transformative outcomes. These approaches are still small scale and confined to specific projects. Limited measurement to evidence wider impact and support lesson learning is hampering scale up and replication of these approaches to other programmes in the region.



- There is a **varied understanding of the concept of gender transformative programming and the GAP 3** across UNICEF staff and partners in the region, which may have contributed to an inconsistent approach to implementing gender transformative programming.
- **Key contributory factors for successfully integrating gender transformative outcomes** include senior leadership buy in, technical leadership to build staff capacity, targeted budgets and resources, meaningful involvement of young people, wider range of partnership and collaboration, flexibility and adaptation, sufficient timeframes of more than three years, and in some cases donor priorities or requirements.

Linked to [Conclusion 4](#) [Conclusion 5](#)

Efficiency

- UNICEF ESAR's resource allocation is **not perceived to be sufficient to implement gender transformative programming** directed at adolescent girls in all their diversity, with **particular challenges in emergency/humanitarian contexts**.
- Although **most adolescent girl focused programming seems to have adopted some inclusive approaches**, the evaluation was unable to review any budget lines allocated for intersectional and equity dimensions, such as to ensure accessibility for girls with disabilities, girls who are refugees, and adolescent girls in hard-to-reach areas.
- The mandatory gender tagging process acts as an incentive to higher-level reporting, but the system is complex and is not perceived to be an accurate reflection of gender transformative programming. In the ESA region, 7% of outputs / vision are tagged with GEM 3, which equates to being tagged as gender transformative programming.

Linked to [Conclusion 5](#) [Conclusion 6](#) [Conclusion 7](#)



Conclusion 5

Capacity gaps. The shift from focusing policy and programming work on being gender responsive to working in a more gender transformative way has inevitably unearthed some capacity challenges and knowledge gaps across a range of stakeholders. Understanding of gender transformative programming and how, and why, to do it varies considerably. Resources and greater prioritisation are required to ensure capacity and buy-in is strengthened across the board.

Conclusion 6

Humanitarian programming. Gender transformative programming is less evident in humanitarian and emergency programming, and there is a sense that the 'gender agenda' is deprioritised in these settings due to a focus on 'life saving' priorities and service provision. The absence of critical understanding of why 'gender transformative programming' is essential and how it can be achieved in these contexts is contributing to this de-prioritisation.

Conclusion 7

Expenditure tracking. The complexity of the systems and processes in place to track gender transformation, such as the gender tagging system, makes it difficult for COs to track the scale of funding investments on adolescent girl programming. It is also leading to inconsistent implementation of the system and inaccurate data. The GAP 3 requires information to be presented differently and revised guidance and processes needs to reflect this.

Sustainability

- **UNICEF supports and prioritises partnerships** with government and civil society partners with the view to building ownership, capacity, and resources to support government scale up or take up by other partners. The evaluation found evidence that programmes designed in line with government sector plans and priorities are **more likely to have clear sustainability goals articulated**. However, these goals are not necessarily related to gender transformative outcomes.
- Key partners for UNICEF ESAR regional and country offices, including in humanitarian and emergency contexts, are **youth-led and women's rights organisations**. These partnerships have been limited to date and more could be done at the country level to explore ways of working together with these groups.

Linked to [Conclusion 3](#)

Impact

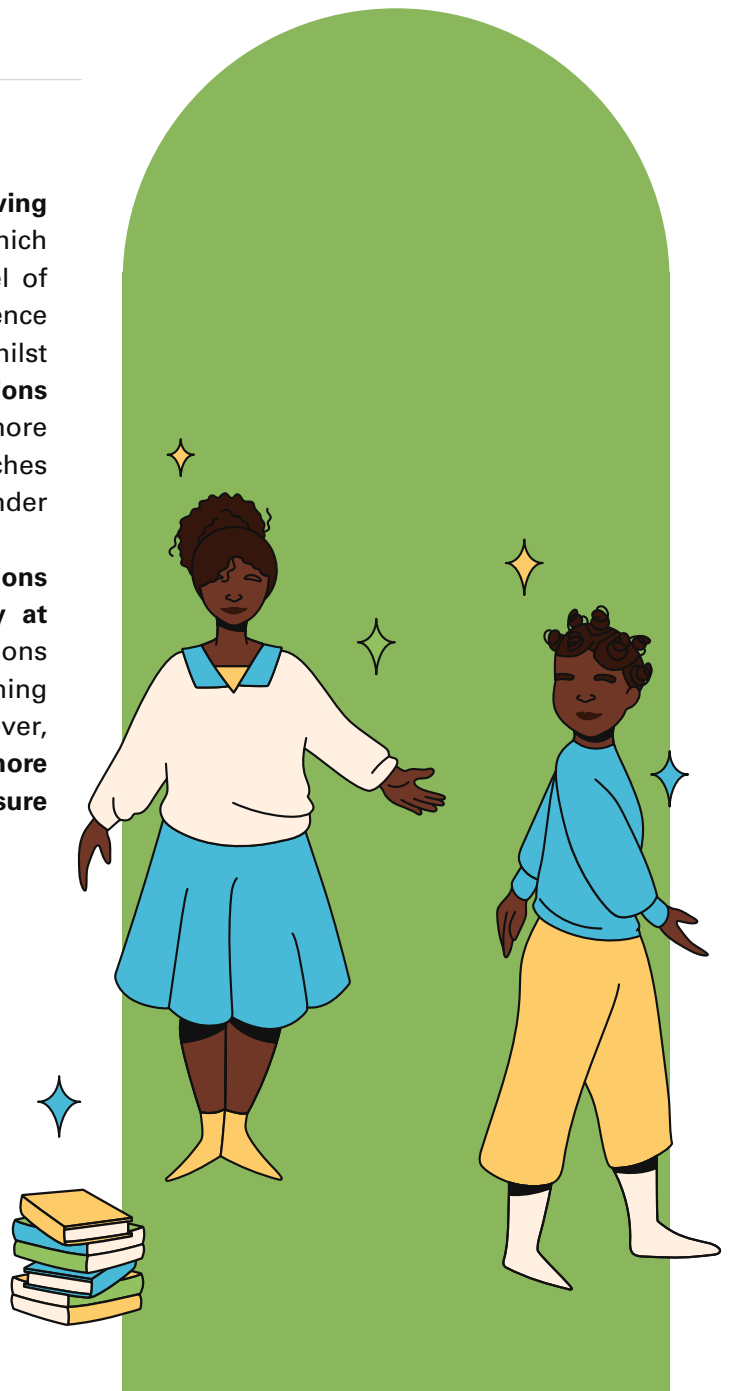
- **Several interventions are effective in improving adolescent girls' voice, agency and leadership**, which were mostly found to be at the individual level of the socio-ecological model, although some evidence was found of outcomes occurring at all levels. Whilst the **strongest evidence was found of interventions taking place at the gender responsive level**, more emergent examples were also found of approaches at the gender transformative level on the gender continuum.
- **Several strong examples were found of interventions which place adolescent girls in their diversity at the heart of an intervention**. Some considerations of intersectionality are taking place and informing programme design and implementation. However, this is not always happening systematically and **more could be done to strengthen the analysis and ensure greater inclusion**.

Linked to [Conclusion 1](#)

Conclusion 8

Ensuring involvement is meaningful.

Ensuring adolescent girls are involved across the programme cycle is an approach widely adopted by most of the programmes reviewed. However, this involvement varies significantly across the programme cycle, and is not as meaningful as it could be. More could be done to leverage existing platforms of youth-led organisations to reach out to a wider diversity of adolescent girls and other young people to ensure opportunities are widely publicised.



Lessons Learned

- UNICEF's **Gender Action Plans are useful tools to drive change at country level**, and GAP 2022 - 2025 signals a strong potential for embedding a deeper focus on transformational change. However, it takes time and resources to build awareness and understanding of any new approach or strategic intent, including a gender-transformative approach. Targeted and sustained capacity building on gender-transformative programming which includes critical reflection and experiential learning would be an effective way to build knowledge and awareness.
- Whilst **adolescent girls' voice, agency and leadership are important aspects** of a gender transformative approach, it is important that this is seen in the context of the socio-ecological model systems approach, which recognises different levels from individual to institutional. This wider understanding can strengthen programme approaches, moving beyond the individual level to address the wider structural and root causes of gender inequality.
- **Partnering and working with men and boys** is crucial for gender transformative programming, but it must be done in the context of supporting wider gender equality programming as gender inequitable norms harm both adolescent girls and boys, especially harmful concepts of masculinity which drive girl's and women's disempowerment. Increasing backlash around girl-intentioned programming is occurring across a range of contexts, as boys are perceived to be left out of development efforts. These perceptions need to be addressed head on by engaging in critical reflection at all levels of organisations and communities.
- Constraints for women and girls in **humanitarian and emergency contexts** are often so severe that gender transformative programming is considered to be impossible. However, these situations can present significant opportunities for gender transformative programming, through partnering with girls' and women-led organisations. Evidence shows that these contexts can encourage transformational change, provided girls and women are at the heart of those approaches and empowered in leadership roles, within a longer term approach to partnership.
- There is **strong potential for joint programmes to lead to gender transformative outcomes**, provided that these are designed and delivered in such a way that the comparative advantage of different agencies is clear, and mechanisms for collaboration are clearly established and maintained. UN agencies need to work more collaboratively to avoid silos to build on each other's inputs to maximise potential for transformative outcomes.
- Improving UNICEF's **budget tracking and tagging to include better disaggregation of intersectional identities** would improve the understanding and awareness of the extent to which programmes are addressing intersectional and equity dimensions.
- **Tight timelines for programme design and multi-country/joint programmes designed in a top-down way at central level should be avoided.** These leave little space for adolescent girls to engage meaningfully in the design and development of programmes.



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Strategic

Recommendation 1: Multi-sectoral, girl-led and rights based programming should be more centred within overall ESAR CO programming to ensure the commitments of GAP 3 are met. CO management needs to integrate cross-sectoral coordination and investment at scale.



Based on Conclusions 1 3 4

Recommendation 2: UNICEF ESARO should review and adapt the mechanisms in place to support stronger south-south coordination and partnership across countries to share experiences, and learning from each other, on what works in gender transformative programming, including outside existing Joint or multi-countries programmes.



Based on Conclusion 3

Recommendation 3: Acknowledging the efforts of UNICEF ESARO to map Women, Girls and Youth Organisations and networks at country and regional level, and to promote partnerships with these organisations, UNICEF COs should accelerate their engagement with these organisations, in line with GAP 3 recommendations. These partnerships must be based on equitable principles, and ways of working contribute to gender transformative outcomes in terms of power sharing, capacity strengthening, and engaging with a wide diversity of women and girls. A systematic country mapping of existing and potential WGOs and YLOs, and their specific expertise, interest and capacity should be undertaken.



Based on Conclusions 6 8

Process

Recommendation 4: Current expenditure tracking and coding processes need to be reviewed to ensure they are capturing the data required for GAP 3 monitoring. This needs to be better reflected in the guidance and refresher training provided.



Based on Conclusion 7

Recommendation 5: There is an urgent need to improve documentation, monitoring, evaluation and knowledge management in particular strengthening indicators used to measure gender transformative outcomes, including more qualitative measurement and disaggregating data to ensure intersectional characteristics are included where it is safe and ethical to do so.



Based on Conclusions 1 4 8

Recommendation 6: Stronger feedback loops need to be developed and consistently applied to ensure that adolescent girls are informed about what action has (or has not) been taken as a result of their inputs and contributions by UNICEF or the programme.



Based on Conclusions 4 6 8

Programmatic

Recommendation 7: A tailored and segmented training package and toolkit on how to build on the work supporting adolescent girls' voice, agency and leadership to lead to gender transformative change across the socio ecological model should be developed. The toolkit should explore 'what is gender transformative programming and how to do it' for different sectors and in different contexts, building on existing materials and providing promising, practical, programme examples.



Based on Conclusions 1 2 4 5

Recommendation 8: Engage men and boys in gender transformative action across programmes to promote concepts of positive masculinities and support greater gender equality. This needs to be done in the context of addressing root causes, patriarchal systems and structural inequalities.



Based on Conclusions 1 4 5 8

EVALUATION BRIEF

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About SDDirect

SDDirect is a UK based Private Sector Social Enterprise that provides specialised research, evidence and technical assistance related to gender equality, disability and social inclusion for overseas development programming and policy.

You can find out more information about us on our website at

<https://www.sddirect.org.uk>

About UNICEF

UNICEF works in the world's toughest places to reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents – and to protect the rights of every child, everywhere. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive and fulfill their potential, from early childhood through adolescence.

And we never give up.

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