

UNITED STATES GLOBAL STRATEGY TO EMPOWER ADOLESCENT GIRLS & SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

October 2016

Sixty-two million girls are not in school and 250 million adolescent girls are living in poverty worldwide. To address this global challenge, in March of 2016, the U.S. Department of State released the [United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls](#). The strategy responds to multiple challenges faced by adolescent girls, including lack of economic opportunities, staggering rates of illiteracy, early and forced marriage, high rates of sexually transmitted infections and HIV, and early pregnancy. The goal of the strategy is to ensure that girls are educated, healthy, and empowered, therefore promoting global development, security, and prosperity.

Building on existing initiatives and policies such as the Let Girls Learn Initiative, PEPFAR's [DREAMS Partnership](#), the [U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally](#), the [U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security](#), and the U.S. Action Plan on Children in Adversity, the strategy is guided by an evidence-based approach and relies on coordinated inter-agency efforts. It highlights five core objectives:

- Enhance girls' access to quality education in safe environments
- Provide economic opportunities and incentives for girls and their families
- Empower girls with information, skills, services, and support
- Mobilize and educate communities to change harmful norms and practices
- Strengthen policy and legal frameworks and accountability

WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS?

In September 2015, the U.S. government officially recognized the term "sexual and reproductive health and rights," and the Adolescent Girl Strategy is the first U.S. strategy to use this term. The strategy emphasizes a whole-of-girl approach, recognizing that girls' education, safety, health and well-being, economic security, and human rights are interconnected. It explicitly promotes the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of adolescent girls as a core component of their overall empowerment.

MATERNAL HEALTH

The strategy asserts that "early pregnancy and childbirth have severe consequences for adolescent girls as compared to young women, including an increased risk of miscarriage and complications at birth, obstetric fistula, and death." (p.6). Maternal mortality remains a leading cause of death among girls aged 15-19, and adolescent girls are often unable to access skilled maternity care, especially if they are married or socially isolated. The strategy prioritizes empowering girls with sexual and reproductive health information and services and access to contraceptive methods.

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FAMILY PLANNING/REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Lack of access to sexual and reproductive health information and services and contraceptive methods remains a major barrier to girls' health and empowerment. The strategy aims to "remove barriers to sexual and reproductive rights" (p.20) and to give girls the information, skills, services, and support they need to "be healthy and empowered to make informed and responsible decisions about their bodies and their lives" (p.13), targeting both married and unmarried girls, both in and out of school. Improving access to contraceptive methods and comprehensive sexuality education and increasing the capacity of girls to fully participate in their communities and make critical decisions about their lives – including reproductive choices – will help girls avoid or delay pregnancy and stay in school.

HIV

Adolescent girls and young women bear a disproportionate risk of acquiring HIV. The strategy promotes policies and programs that increase girls' access to HIV prevention, testing, and treatment, and it complements and reinforces the DREAMS Partnership, an initiative aimed at reducing HIV incidence among adolescent girls and young women in 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

SEXUAL HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Protecting the sexual rights of adolescent girls is highlighted through key commitments to ending harmful traditional practices, including early and forced marriage and female genital cutting (FGC), instituting comprehensive sexuality education in national curricula, and removing barriers to comprehensive services. The strategy also addresses the importance of educating "adolescent boys about sexual and reproductive health and rights and the consequences of violence and engag[ing] them in thinking critically about gender norms." (p.13)

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence is a cross-cutting concern highlighted throughout the strategy. Strategic objectives include ending early and forced marriage and meeting the health and rights needs of married girls, and ending FGC and addressing its short- and long-term health effects through community-led initiatives. It also calls for integrating gender-sensitive and adolescent girl-specific services into the design and provision of humanitarian responses, including preventing and responding to sexual violence and providing comprehensive SRHR services in conflict and crisis settings.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR HEALTH AND GENDER EQUITY (CHANGE)

The Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) is a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization that promotes the sexual and reproductive health and human rights of women and girls worldwide through education and advocacy efforts that affect the development and implementation of U.S. policies.