

# 'Left behind' adolescent women must be prioritised within sustainable development agenda

February 11 2021

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The needs of millions of overlooked, 'left behind' adolescent women must become a more significant priority within international efforts to end poverty by 2030, a UK Government-commissioned report is urging.

The University of Cambridge report, which was commissioned by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, argues that there is an urgent need to do more to support marginalised, [adolescent women](#) in low and [middle-income countries](#); many of whom leave [education](#) early and then face an ongoing struggle to build secure livelihoods.

Amid extensive evidence which highlights the difficulties these women face, it estimates that almost a third of adolescent women in many such countries are not in education, training, or work.

'Adolescents' (technically people aged 10 to 19) comprise about one sixth of the world's population. Women in this age group are some of the most vulnerable people in the world. The report argues that unless more is done to support them, it is unlikely that the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals—which include ending poverty, ensuring inclusive education, and empowering women and girls—will be met.

In particular, the document highlights the need for more concerted efforts to be made to prevent gender discrimination in labour markets, strengthen social safety nets for women, and provide both formal

education and continued training for the huge numbers of adolescent women who, it says, 'have missed out on acquiring relevant skills to enhance their livelihood opportunities.'

Professor Pauline Rose, Director of the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, said: "Marginalised adolescent girls are those who experience extreme poverty, live in rural areas, have disabilities, are affected by conflict, or belong to disadvantaged groups. We need to prioritise these [young women](#) both in education and as they transition into work. Millions are being left behind by a range of interlocking problems, and strong, sustained political leadership is needed to turn that around."

The Government has identified girls' education as a key focus of the UK's presidency of the G7 group of industrial countries this year, and gender equality will be mainstreamed across the different ministerial tracks. The new report raises gender inequality—both in education and employment—as major areas of concern for the international community.

The report further stresses that adolescence is a make-or-break time for many girls in low- and lower-middle-income countries and should therefore be a focal point of international efforts. During this period, many young women leave education early, either to work, or because they are expected to marry and start a family. Often, they do so without having acquired basic literacy or numeracy. In addition, very few have the transferable skills or training that they need to succeed in the world of work.

The document draws on more than 150 sources to evidence both the scale of the problem and the nature of the barriers that marginalised adolescent girls face. For many, a quality education remains a far-off

dream. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, fewer than one in 10 girls from poor households in [rural areas](#) complete lower secondary education.

Many also struggle to find secure employment. Data from 30 low- and middle-income countries suggests that 31% of young women are not in education, employment or training, compared with 16% of boys. Those who do find jobs frequently work for low wages, in unsafe settings and without any sort of social safety net.

One of the main reasons for this, the report says, is a lack of access to appropriate skills development and training. For example, one in three unemployed adolescent girls in the Asia-Pacific region, and one in five in sub-Saharan Africa, report that the entry requirements for their preferred career path exceed their education and training.

Compounding these problems, gender discrimination in both labour markets and wider society is an accepted norm in many countries. Among many other examples, this manifests itself in inheritance laws which transfer land and property to sons but not daughters; the tendency to force girls who struggle to find work into early marriage and childbearing; and widespread gender-related violence. One study in Nigeria, cited in the report, found that two-thirds of young female apprentices had experienced physical violence—and 39% said that their employer was the most recent perpetrator.

While the research also identifies many successful individual programmes around the world that address some of these issues, it stresses the need for policy-makers internationally to prioritise adolescent girls in larger-scale, systemic reforms.

It makes numerous recommendations about how that can be done, including:

- Implementing measures and laws that challenge [gender discrimination](#) in education, labour markets and wider society.
- Curriculum reforms to develop women's transferrable skills in school, supported by skills development programmes outside the education system.
- Catch-up programmes for those who have missed out on a basic education.
- Strengthening social safety nets, which have been shown to benefit women in particular.
- Providing sexual and reproductive health services and information for all adolescent girls.
- Providing counselling and rehabilitation services that offer practical support to adolescent girls who have been forced into unsafe work settings.

The report highlights the particular role that female political leaders and parliamentarians can play in driving forward a more integrated agenda for marginalised young women, and in challenging patriarchal norms that hold back gender equality.

It also warns that many of the trends documented are currently at risk of becoming worse as a result of COVID-19. "The best way that Governments can signal their commitment to this problem is by putting women and [girls](#) at the forefront of COVID-19 recovery efforts and ambitions to build back better," Rose said. "It is vital that this includes a strong focus on [adolescent girls](#)."

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: 'Left behind' adolescent women must be prioritised within sustainable development agenda (2021, February 11) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-02-left-adolescent-women-prioritised-sustainable.html>

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