

# GIRLS TO THE FRONT:

Time for foreign aid to see  
adolescent girls



The charity for  
girls' equality

“The Labor Government has the opportunity to supercharge action towards gender equality through a specific focus on adolescent girls as agents of change through Australia’s aid and development program, ensuring that they can live free from violence, get back into school, and thrive.”

This report demonstrates how current aid and development finance is targeting adolescent girls and their priorities, drawing on research and evidence from aid reports and strategies, and from adolescent girls and young women themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Why adolescent girls?

Gender equality and climate action are impossible to discuss without centering adolescent girls and gender diverse young people. There are over 500 million adolescent girls aged 10-19 living in developing countries. Importantly, more than half the global population of adolescent girls are in the Asia Pacific region. Our neighbours in South Asia host a staggering 340 million adolescents, and East Asia and the Pacific are home to 277 million<sup>1</sup>. In the Sub-Saharan region, 10 to 19 year olds make up almost one quarter of the region’s population. In Afghanistan, almost half of the population is under 18.

Adolescent girls are already agents of change in their communities – leading movements for climate justice and resilient communities; fighting for their right to be heard in political forums; and demanding their right to be safe in their homes, online and in public places. Yet their rights, freedoms and education have seen devastating setbacks in recent years, particularly as a result of COVID-19 and the escalating humanitarian crises around the world.

Driving this is systemic discrimination based on gendered attitudes, norms, practices and behaviours. Adolescent girls are held back from realising their full potential as change agents and leaders because of deep rooted, ongoing and reinforced gendered attitudes and norms of behaviour. Patriarchal power structures are unavoidable in their homes, their schools, their communities, in business and in politics.

The participation, education and safety of adolescent girls is vital to economic development, gender equality and climate action regionally and across the world. The

United Nations Population Fund has recognised girls aged 10 as the key group whose potential, if unlocked, will create the economic and social conditions needed to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Adolescent girls, in all their diversity, are central to COVID-19 recovery efforts and economic development in the Asia-Pacific region. They are amongst the most disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis, but also the most overlooked when it comes to the solutions. And the elevation of women to leadership roles cannot occur without those women being safe, educated and empowered in adolescence.

In working with and centering adolescent girls in all their diversity, we can together challenge unequal gendered power relations and norms which determine whether or not adolescent girls in our region can realise their rights.

Although critical to climate action and gender equality, the distinct needs of adolescent girls are often overlooked in Australia’s aid and development program, and they fall through the cracks of traditional efforts designed for women, younger girls and children. This is a critical time when they are at most risk of being pulled out of school, child and early forced marriage, early pregnancy and labor exploitation.

**The Labor Government has the opportunity to supercharge action towards gender equality through a specific focus on adolescent girls as agents of change through Australia’s aid and development program, ensuring that they can live free from violence, get back into school, and thrive.**

## What did we do?

*COVID-19 Development response plan, Development Program Progress Reports, aid policies and strategies, select multilateral institutions and funding flows were reviewed for reference to adolescent girls, youth, girls or women across six priorities areas for investment: **secondary education; sexual and reproductive health information and services; young women and girls’ leadership; economic empowerment of girls and young women; gender-based violence initiatives focused on adolescent girls; and adolescent girls in emergencies.***<sup>i</sup>

*We compared this information to what adolescent girls have shared through key reports and what young women and gender diverse people in Australia consider to be priority investment areas for Australia’s aid program.*

**Despite the challenges facing adolescent girls in our region, there has been little change in investment since 2016.**

<sup>i</sup> Based on analysis undertaken by The Social Economy Group, 2022, drawn from 2020 OECD DAC Creditor Reporting System data.

# Where are adolescent girls' priorities reflected in current policies?

- The Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy does not capture the unique and complex challenges that adolescent girls face due to both their age and gender, or the interventions that can successfully address these challenges.
- Partnerships for Recovery, although recognising the importance of gender equality, did not include any target on gender equality, setting Australia back in its support of adolescent girls.<sup>2</sup>
- Investment in gender equality and gender-responsive budget-based decisions are difficult to track and increasingly complex in the context of spending on programmes that impact on adolescent girls. There are a number of investments that potentially target adolescent girls, however without a stand-alone strategy or tracking of investments, it is difficult to conclude with certainty if this is the case.

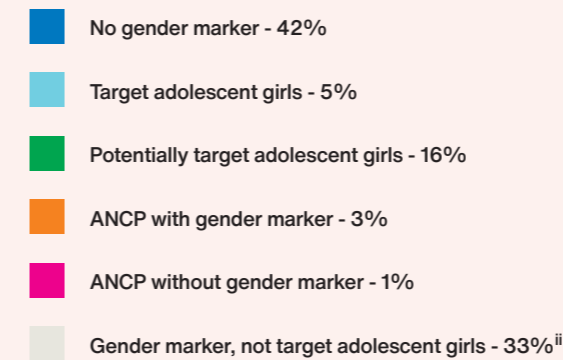
|   | 1. Secondary education | 2. Sexual and reproductive health information and services focused on adolescent girls | 3. Young women and girls leadership | 4. Economic Empowerment of Girls & Young Women | 5. Gender based violence initiatives focused on adolescent girls | 6. Adolescent girls in emergencies, |
|---|------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|--|--|-------------------------------------|
| <a href="#">Partnerships for Recovery Australia's Development Program</a> | -                      | -  | -                                   | -  | -  | -                                   |
| <a href="#">Performance Assessment</a>                                    | ●                      | ●  | -                                   | ●  | ●  | -                                   |
| <a href="#">Climate Change Action Strategy</a>                            |                        |  | ●                                   | ●  |  |                                     |
| <a href="#">Foreign Policy White Paper</a>                                | -                      | ●  | ●                                   | ●  | -  | ●                                   |
| <a href="#">Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy</a>          | ●                      | ●  | ●                                   | ●  | ●  | ●                                   |

## Key:

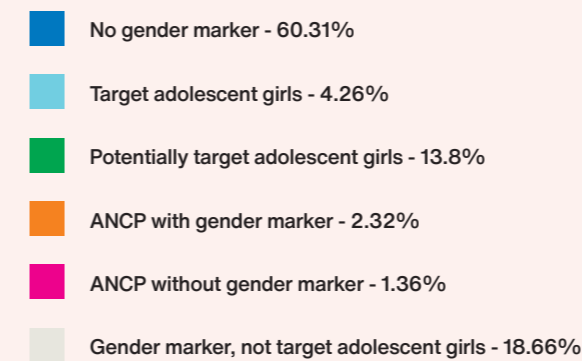
|        |                  |       |       |
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| Focus: | Adolescent girls | Girls | Women |
|--------|------------------|-------|-------|

# What funding currently goes towards adolescent girls in Australian aid?

## 2016



## 2020



## Education financing

The mapping shows that although COVID-19 has heavily impacted adolescent girls' rights to education, further exacerbating existing barriers, Australia's aid spending has not grown to meet this need.

The Australian Government's Global Partnership for Education (GPE) replenishment in 2021 was critical, however there is the opportunity to reaffirm our position as a leader in inclusive and quality education, ensuring that adolescent girls in the region can get back into school and thrive.

Investment in secondary education is small compared to investments in primary education and post-secondary education, with only 5% of overall education investments going towards secondary education<sup>3</sup>. This matters, because secondary education is the point where girls are more likely to drop out of school to fulfil caring or labour responsibilities or due to other gendered barriers. Alongside commitments to the GPE, there is the opportunity to expand investment in secondary education through Australia's bilateral program, to respond to the conditions driven by the pandemic. Investment in programs that support market oriented technical and vocational skill training and informal further learning as an inclusive pathway for adolescent girls and young women who have not been able to access formal secondary education is also critical.

<sup>ii</sup> Note: gender marker refers to the DAC gender policy marker which records aid expenditure that targets gender equality as an objective.

# Why education?

COVID-19 and climate change have exacerbated already existing barriers to adolescent girls accessing their right to education. If we don't step up and invest in education that responds to the needs and rights of girls, over 20 million secondary school-aged girls are at risk of not returning to school due to COVID-19 disruptions<sup>4</sup>. A report by the Malala Fund projected that in 2021 alone, climate-related events would have prevented approximately four million girls in low-and lower-middle-income countries from completing their education<sup>5</sup>. Plan International's Better Today report reiterates the difficulty in accessing online schooling due to financial and equipment barriers, in addition to the increased burden of work that students take on when studying at home. Adolescent girls with disabilities face additional challenges, such as inaccessible materials and a lack of support and assistive technology that is often only available in schools<sup>6</sup>.

The impact of COVID-19 and climate related disasters and events on adolescent girls' education threatens to undo the years of progress and hard-won gains that Australia's aid and diplomacy efforts have made for gender equality, especially in the Asia Pacific region.

## Education and gender equality

Education can be transformative when it comes to gender equality. It can contribute to the prevention of gender-based violence, and through comprehensive sexuality education, complement the provision of sexual and reproductive health services. Gender transformative education can 'transform stereotypes, attitudes, norms and practices by challenging power relations and rethinking gender norms and binaries'<sup>7</sup>.

Plan International's Champion of Change curriculum uses education as part of a community-wide strategy for promoting gender equality and social norm change which engages girls, young women, gender diverse young people, and critically, boys and young men, as agents of change to address gender-based violence and discrimination.

**Despite the rise in gender-based violence exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia's investment in prevention of gender-based violence initiatives and sexual and reproductive health information and services that target adolescent girls, has decreased since 2016.**

- In 2016, approximately \$77.6 million was spent on sexual and reproductive health information or services specifically targeting adolescent girls, in 2020 this decreased to \$30.01 million.
- In 2016, approximately \$59.4 million was spent on gender-based violence initiatives with adolescent girls as a key beneficiary, in 2020 this decreased to \$43.65 million.

## Education and climate change

Education can drive transformative change when it comes to climate action. [Raising our Voice: Funding Climate Education and Youth Leadership in SE Asia and the Pacific](#)<sup>8</sup> shows how education can be a pathway for fighting climate change, through developing skills to lead a low carbon economy, increasing understanding of disaster risk reduction and adaptation actions to extreme weather events and empowering adolescent girls to be leaders and participate in decision making. Currently, Australia's climate financing in the region is severely lacking in addressing girls' education as a pathway to tackling climate change and building disaster risk resilience. The Brookings Institute has calculated that investing in girls' education is one of the most overlooked solutions to climate change, and that investing in 12 years of quality education and sexual and reproductive health rights could avert an enormous 85 gigatons of carbon emissions by 2050<sup>9</sup>.

# What are adolescent girls saying across the region?



[Better Normal](#)<sup>10</sup> presents a vision for a better normal as the world rebuilds from the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on youth research led by young people in Australia and Vietnam. Education was a fundamental pillar of this vision, with young people calling for 'a world of equal access to quality and inclusive education and training resources, teaching compassionate understanding of others beyond the classroom, going hand-in-hand with fundamental and practical knowledge of the world'.



[Smart Successful Strong](#)<sup>11</sup> young women and adolescent girls talk about the barriers to education that adolescent girls in South East Asia and the Pacific face due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including stressful home environments; decline in mental and emotional well-being; quality and delivery of remote learning; unequal access to technology and devices; increased risk of gender based violence; prioritisation of adolescent girls' education by families and communities because of gendered norms and expectations; child, early and forced marriage; and economic impacts. They call for all adolescent girls to be able to complete their education, wanting investment in initiatives that bridge the digital divide, provide mental health and emotional wellbeing support and remove financial barriers to completing education.

# What are young women saying in Australia?

We surveyed over 1000 young women and gender diverse young people aged 18-24 year old about where they think the Australian aid budget can have the most impact:

- 85% think that the Australian Government should increase efforts to support local actions that protect and uphold girls' rights and freedoms across the world.
- 84% believe that having the Australian aid program help girls access secondary school will improve gender equality across the world.

## Recommendations

- 1.** Ensure that adolescent girls and young women are cited as a specific group with distinct needs within the new development strategy and any renewed Gender Equality Strategy.
- 2.** Set a target that at least 15 per cent of all investments with the principal or significant objective of advancing gender equality, identify adolescent girls and young women in all their diversity as the primary beneficiaries by 2030.<sup>iii</sup>
- 3.** Increase investment in programs that address the barriers faced by adolescent girls in accessing quality and inclusive secondary education.
- 4.** Involve adolescent girls in the design and delivery of Australia's aid program, particularly the consultation for the new development strategy, recognising that they are agents of change in their communities.

<sup>iii</sup> Based on our analysis, in 2020 approximately 7% of Australia's aid investments were marked as having a principal objective of advancing gender equality, and 33% were marked as having gender equality as a significant objective. With less than 5% of current investments directed towards adolescent girls but almost 14% of potential investments, formalising a target of 15% would make adolescent girls visible and allow more ambition into the future.

## END NOTES

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- 5 Malala Fund, 2020, *A greener, fairer future: Why leaders need to invest in climate and girls' education*, available at: <https://www.ungei.org/publication/greener-fairer-future#:~:text=Malala%20Fund's%20new%20report%2C%20A,continue%2C%20by%202025...>
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- 8 Plan International Australia, 2021, *Raising our voice: Funding Climate Education and Youth Leadership in SE Asia and the Pacific*, available at: <https://www.plan.org.au/publications/raising-our-voice-funding-climate-education-and-youth-leadership-in-se-asia-and-the-pacific/>
- 9 The Brookings Institute, 2021, *Why is Girls Education Important For Climate Action?*, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2021/02/10/why-is-girls-education-important-for-climate-action/>
- 10 Plan International, 2020, *A Better Normal: Girls call for a revolutionary reset*, available at: <https://www.plan.org.au/publications/a-better-normal-girls-call-for-a-revolutionary-reset/>
- 11 Plan International Australia, 2021, *Smart, Successful, Strong: The case for investing in adolescent girls' education in aid and COVID-19 response and recovery*, available at: <https://www.plan.org.au/publications/smart-successful-strong/>



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