

# Invest early, change everything

Unlocking the potential of adolescent girls  
in the Asia-Pacific region



Until we are all equal

Report summary & data snapshot

# Adolescent girls must be central to Australia's gender equality strategy

## Why this matters

**Across the Asia-Pacific region, 240 million adolescent girls are growing up amid climate shocks, economic pressures, and an organised backlash against gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights.<sup>1,2,3</sup>**

Adolescence is when inequality takes root—girls are most likely to leave school, marry early, face violence, or experience unintended pregnancy.

These setbacks have lifelong consequences. Investment delayed until adulthood cannot recover what is lost during these years.<sup>4,5</sup>

Yet adolescent girls are often invisible in development policy and funding. They're grouped under "women and children," masking their unique needs.

When budgets tighten, programs for girls are among the first to go.<sup>6,7</sup> Ignoring this stage isn't neutral. It locks in inequality and costs societies billions in lost potential.<sup>8,24</sup>

### Supporting adolescent girls isn't charity, it's strategy.

When girls stay in school and avoid early marriage and violence, communities are safer, economies

stronger, and the region more stable. These outcomes align with Australia's goals for gender equality, economic resilience, and security. Investing now means future aid investments can achieve more and strengthens partnerships in our region.

- **Over 240 million adolescent girls** (10–19) live in the Asia-Pacific region, representing one of the largest adolescent cohorts globally.<sup>1</sup>
- **Nearly 1 in 5 girls** worldwide are still married before age 18, with progress uneven across regions and limited gains in parts of East Asia and the Pacific.<sup>1</sup>
- **650 million girls and women** alive today experienced sexual violence in childhood, with adolescence a peak period of risk.<sup>1</sup>

## The investment gap

Despite the scale, less than 1% of global aid is targeted to adolescent girls.<sup>9</sup> This is a missed opportunity: investing during adolescence delivers the highest returns: better health, education, income, and intergenerational benefits.

In 2022, USD 8.57 billion of global ODA was gender- and adolescent-targeted — just 4.76% of total ODA, down from 6.18% in 2019.<sup>9</sup>



# Gaps in priority areas

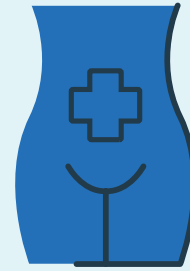
## Education & Economic Participation



**Secondary school completion is critical for future work and leadership, yet many girls drop out due to costs and unsafe schools.**<sup>10 11</sup>

- Girls not in education or training are more than double those of boys in Thailand, Myanmar, Fiji, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, and more than 15 times higher in India.<sup>18</sup>
- In low-income countries, 9 in 10 adolescent girls and young women (15–24) are offline, reinforcing a gendered digital divide that limits education and employment pathways.<sup>1</sup>

## Sexual & Reproductive Health



**Millions of adolescent pregnancies occur each year, often without access to appropriate care.**<sup>14 15 16 17</sup>

- Complications from pregnancy and childbirth account for 1 in every 23 deaths among girls aged 15–19 globally.<sup>1</sup>
- Adolescent fertility rates in Pacific small island states reach 50–65 births per 1,000 girls (15–19), compared with 12 per 1,000 in Australia.<sup>31</sup>

## Violence Prevention



**Violence often begins in adolescence, but programs still focus on adults.**

- Intimate partner violence among ever-married adolescent girls exceeds 20% in Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Myanmar.<sup>10</sup>
- School-related violence remains a major driver of dropout: in India, over 50% of girls aged 5–18 report violence at school; in Timor-Leste, 60% report violent discipline and 9.7% sexual violence.<sup>11 12</sup>

## Climate & Crisis Response



**Girls are first to be pulled from school or married off during climate shocks and emergencies yet rarely targeted in humanitarian action.**<sup>21 22 23</sup>

- In a six-country Pacific study, 50% of girls reported missing school due to climate-related disasters.<sup>20</sup>
- Climate change could push 158 million more women and girls into poverty by 2050.<sup>23</sup>

## What works

The evidence is clear: integrated, rights-based programs that combine education, sexual and reproductive health, violence prevention, skills development and norm change consistently outperform single-sector approaches.<sup>24 25 26</sup>

Global and regional modelling shows **high benefit-cost ratios**, reflecting avoided health and social protection costs, higher lifetime earnings, reduced exposure to violence, and intergenerational gains.<sup>27 28</sup> UNICEF calls this a “**triple dividend**”—benefits during adolescence, across adult life, and for the next generation.<sup>26</sup>

The task is not to choose between protection and empowerment, but to change the conditions that make harmful practices like child marriage seem inevitable.<sup>19 29</sup>

- Investing USD 1 billion in cash transfers, parenting programmes and adolescent-responsive SRHR services yields an average benefit-cost ratio of 4.2:1 globally, and 3.2:1 in Asia.<sup>27</sup>
- Scaling proven interventions to 95% coverage across five South-East Asian countries (2024–2030) would:
  - Cost USD 4.9–5.0 billion
  - Avert 1.4 million unintended adolescent pregnancies
  - Avert 1.1 million child marriages
  - Generate USD 13.4 billion in economic benefits by 2050 (benefit-cost ratio 2.7:1, rising to 9.8:1 if sustained).<sup>13</sup>
- Multisector investment packages for adolescent girls can generate benefit-cost ratios up to 26:1 and contribute USD 7.7 trillion to global GDP by 2050.<sup>13</sup>



## Call to action

Australia’s International Gender Equality Strategy<sup>30</sup> can’t succeed without adolescent girls at the centre. We recommend:

- **Commit dedicated funding:** AUD 50 million over four years for initiatives that explicitly benefit adolescent girls, aligned across all five IGES priority areas.
- **Set a portfolio target:** At least 15% of gender equality investments identify adolescent girls as primary beneficiaries by 2030.
- **Strengthen visibility and data:** Require age- and sex-disaggregated data, including younger adolescents (10–14), across relevant investments.

These steps are achievable within existing systems and will deliver lasting impact for girls—and for Australia’s regional objectives.



## Bottom line

**Adolescent girls aren’t a niche group—they’re the foundation for gender equality and stability.**

**Investing early is smart, cost-effective, and urgent.**

The full report *Invest Early, Change Everything: Unlocking the potential of adolescent girls in the Asia-Pacific Region* is available [here](#).

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**Acknowledgement of country:** Plan International Australia acknowledges and pays respects to First Nations Elders past and present. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded and that this land always was and always will be First Nations land. We recognise First Nations ongoing connection to land, waters and community, and we commit to ongoing learning, deep and active listening, and taking action in solidarity.

Plan International Australia is committed to allyship and solidarity in the ongoing fight for First Nations justice and the long and continuing history of discrimination and disenfranchisement of First Nations people in Australia.

There is still much work to be done and the need for an unwavering commitment, not just from Plan International Australia but from all sectors of society. Together, we can build a future that not only acknowledges but actively celebrates and respects the rich cultural heritage, histories and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This journey towards reconciliation is also a journey towards justice, which includes discussions around a Treaty, a comprehensive Voice in decision-making, and the healing derived from recognising and addressing both historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism on First Nations communities.

**Authors:** This paper was written by independent development consultant Kylie Fisk of Axiom Consulting Group for Plan International Australia. The contributions of Plan International team members Si Qi Wen, Casey McGowan, Hayley Cull, Claire Knox and Conor Costello to the review and development of the report are recognised and appreciated.




**Plan International Australia** is a global independent development and humanitarian organisation. As one of the oldest, largest and most experienced organisations in its field, Plan works alongside children, young people, supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the injustices facing girls and the most marginalised children.



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15/150 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne VIC 3000  
GPO Box 2818, Melbourne VIC 3001  
Tel: 13 75 26 Fax: +61 (3) 9670 1130  
Email: [info@plan.org.au](mailto:info@plan.org.au)

ABN 49 004 875 807

 /planaustralia  
 @PlanAustralia  
 @plan\_australia