

## INTRODUCTION

In foreign policy and development circles, there is an increasing focus on youth — and with good reason. Evidence points to the benefits of the so-called demographic dividend, or economic returns that can be unlocked when countries invest in the health and empowerment of their young people. But what does that

really mean, and what is the role of the U.S. government in advancing youth empowerment globally? What are the barriers that young people face in accessing their health and rights? And how can U.S. foreign policy and assistance help to dismantle those barriers and promote a more peaceful and prosperous future?

## UNLOCKING THE DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND

The demographic dividend is the name given by economists to the boost in economic growth that can result from changes in a country's population age structure. ("Demographic Dividend," 2018). This demographic transition — from high birth and death rates to low birth rates — creates a population in which there is a greater number of healthy adults entering the workforce in proportion to the number of children or older people who depend on them, thus fostering sustained economic growth.

As of 2017, an estimated 214 million women in the global South wanted to avoid or delay pregnancy lacked access to modern contraception (Guttmacher, 2017). The health implications of such a large unmet need are vast and disproportionately impact girls and women. Some barriers to care include intimate-partner violence and rape, as well as parental consent requirements and fear of stigmatization from healthcare providers or a lack of confidentiality (Hokororo et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to the World Health Organization, self-harm is the leading cause of death among adolescent girls aged 15-19 worldwide — a trend that may be sparked by an overwhelming sense that their lives and bodies are not their own or that

aspirations for independence are less likely to be realized (United Nations Population Fund, 2016).

Although countries are keen to reap the benefits of the demographic dividend, they cannot be achieved without a concerted investment in young people's development, particularly in their sexual and reproductive health. If young women are unable to plan and space pregnancies, it is difficult for them to obtain a higher level of education or maintain workforce participation. And although there are greater opportunities for young girls and women today than there were a generation ago, child marriage, early pregnancy, forced or coerced sex and unintended pregnancy are enduring violations of their sexual and reproductive rights and, at a macro level, severely limit the potential of the demographic dividend.

One cultural practice that contributes to almost all of the barriers to reaching a demographic dividend is early marriage. Girls who marry before the age of 15 face the overwhelming likelihood of early childbearing, as well as increased risk of physical and emotional abuse (Sedgh, Ashford, & Hussain, 2016). In some countries, there is evidence of almost a binary option of *either* going to school *or* getting married early. A recent ICRW study found that girls who marry early are significantly less likely to complete their secondary school education which, in turn, lowers their potential earnings as adults,

thereby reducing their family's economic potential (Wodon et al., 2017). Moreover, child marriage and, thus, lower educational attainment, creates ripples into the next generation by diminishing the educational and health prospects for their children.

## EVIDENCE ON SOLUTIONS

ICRW's research shows that women's inability to make their own reproductive choices — and in particular, the onset of childbearing during adolescence — costs countries billions of dollars each year (Wodon et al., 2017). With fewer children to support and potentially more people in the labor force, a country has a window of opportunity for rapid economic growth if the right social and economic investments and policies are made in health, education, governance and the economy.

Efforts to support girls, women and couples — particularly those most marginalized economically and geographically — to achieve their fertility goals can have lasting impacts that go beyond physical health, to include educational attainment, labor force participation and mental well-being. Investments in sexual and reproductive health enable girls to have greater control over reproductive decisions and increase self-esteem and self-efficacy in their relationships with male sexual partners (United Nations Population Fund, 2016). Benefits of these investments are not exclusive to just girls and women — research shows that the demographic dividend is all-inclusive.

Much of the evidence for the demographic dividend comes from the rise of East Asian economies between the 1960s and 1990s (United Nations Population Fund, 2016). The dividend accounts for as much as one third of the rise in incomes in the region during that period (United Nations Population Fund, 2016). In South Korea, for example, the average number of children born to a woman was 5.4 in 1950. Seeking to unlock a demographic dividend, the country invested in economic development, education and health, including prioritizing access to family planning. By 1975, the average number of children was 2.9, women's labor force participation had increased and more children were completing high school (Population Matters, 2017).

Investments in health and education are powerful vehicles for promoting economic growth and human well-being (Bloom, Kuhn, & Prettner, 2015). As part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), "Ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services by 2030" was determined to have one of the two highest benefit-cost ratios (Kohler & Behrman, 2014). Investments in the health of girls and women have the potential to speed up a country's demographic transition and to increase the size of the demographic dividend. One study recently showed that, for each additional dollar spent on contraceptive services, the cost of pregnancy-related care would drop by US\$2.20 (Darroch, et al, 2017).

Comprehensive sexuality education is also an important intervention as a critical source of age-appropriate information for all youth, but particularly girls as they face specific and unique challenges throughout their progression from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. There is clear evidence that comprehensive sexuality education improves sexual and reproductive health by reducing unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV (UNESCO, 2015a). CSE also has a demonstrated impact on improving self-esteem, transforming gender and social norms and building self-efficacy (United Nations Population Fund, 2016).



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## U.S. POLICY LANDSCAPE

It is the policy of the U.S. government to support youth empowerment, particularly for adolescent girls, across a host of agencies tasked with promulgating U.S. foreign policy and assistance. If fully funded and implemented, these policies would help countries around the world to unlock the demographic dividend by creating an enabling environment for young people to be healthy and thrive. The most relevant of these is the U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls, a holistic strategy that uses evidence to identify the myriad obstacles facing girls and harnesses the full power of relevant government agencies to address them.

The goal of the U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls (Girl Strategy) “...is to ensure adolescent girls are educated, healthy, economically and socially empowered, and free from violence and discrimination, thereby promoting global development, security, and prosperity” (U.S. Department of State, 2016). As noted above, girls who are economically and socially empowered, able to access safe and quality education through at least the secondary levels, and to choose if, whom and when they marry or if and when to bear children are more likely to have better health and economic outcomes. Investments in these girls yields benefits not only for the girls themselves but for their communities and national economies.

The United States already invests a great deal of foreign assistance dollars through various government agencies, and the Girl Strategy works to coordinate those efforts, thereby maximizing U.S. taxpayer dollars. The Girl Strategy has implementation plans from four U.S. government agencies: Department of State, USAID, Millennium Challenge Corporation, the Peace Corps, and specific recommendations on the coordination between those agencies to avoid duplication of work and amplify positive outcomes for girls. Since it was released, the Department of Labor and the Department of Agriculture have also been coordinating their efforts to empower adolescent girls against the objectives of the Girl Strategy.

The Girl Strategy took years to write and coordinate within the U.S. government. If the United States hopes to usher in the economic benefits of a healthy, well-educated and



empowered generation of youth, the Girl Strategy is the most effective way to do that.

In addition, there are a number of other new and ongoing efforts that will also be crucial in efforts to unlock the demographic dividend: the Reinforcing Education Accountability in Development Act of 2017, or READ Act, which became law in September 2017, promotes education up to and including secondary education, with an emphasis on helping girls overcome barriers to school completion and learning outcomes. The strategy that corresponds with that legislation is still forthcoming, requires regular progress reports to Congress (READ Act, 2017) and should address the specific barriers facing girls, keep them healthy and enable them to complete their education.

The Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017 (Women, Peace, and Security Act, 2017), which was signed into law in October of 2017, mandates a Strategy to advance

women's full participation in various peace and security processes. However, it does not specifically address the needs of adolescent girls or efforts to address the increase in child marriage that often occurs in conflict settings (USAID, 2016). The forthcoming Strategy tied to this legislation should include adolescent girls throughout and specifically address ending child marriage and keeping girls in school, which is known to increase peace efforts and will have a positive impact on the demographic dividend.

In addition to recent legislation, the United States has several other relevant executive branch policies that make specific recommendations and contain relevant implementation plans, guidance and recommendations for empowering girls and addressing issues like child marriage. These include but are not limited to:

1. The recently updated U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally (USAID, 2016);
2. USAID's Vision for Action on Child Marriage (USAID, 2012); and
3. USAID's Child, Early and Forced Marriage Resource Guide (USAID, 2015).

### ***Policy Recommendations***

While the landscape of U.S. foreign policy has strong commitments to advance youth empowerment and the realization of the demographic dividend, action is urgently needed to ensure these efforts are successful. We urge policymakers to enact the following:

- ♦ Reinstatement of full funding for U.S. family planning assistance, including funding to end child marriage at the Congressional Budget Office's recommended \$24 million (Congressional Budget Office, 2012).
- ♦ Full funding for the implementation and coordination of the Girl Strategy as an essential component of U.S. foreign policy in order to achieve the demographic dividend.
- ♦ Full funding for UNFPA, which, among other services, is the technical leader in the U.N. system in responding to child marriage and providing family planning information and services, particularly youth-friendly and age-appropriate services for adolescents.

- ♦ Increasing investments in comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care for adolescents, including CSE and contraception (ICRW, 2017).
- ♦ Inclusion of child marriage and girls' empowerment in the forthcoming Women, Peace and Security Strategy.
- ♦ Inclusion of mechanisms to address the barriers keeping girls out of school in the forthcoming Strategy mandated by the READ Act.

## **CONCLUSION**

Adolescents — and adolescent girls in particular — have enormous potential, both as individual agents of change and as part of a generation that, if empowered to lead healthy and productive lives, will contribute to larger shifts that can create a more peaceful and prosperous planet. As this brief has noted, the demographic dividend that can be unlocked when the health and empowerment of young people is made a priority investment can have economic returns for countries with high numbers of young people, but also in terms of the return on investments made by donor governments like the United States.

Young people are not automatically going to return dividends simply by being young, or by virtue of their numbers. Without targeted investments in adolescents, the window of opportunity that could exist for rapid economic growth will not come to be. These investments should focus on adolescent health and well-being, including education about and access to contraception, the prevention of child marriage and greater support for adolescent girls who are already married. For the greatest return on taxpayer dollars, the United States should invest in adolescent girls. Quality education should be a top priority and lead to safe employment opportunities.







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