

Closing the “Girl Gap” in Education

Education changes lives — and FHI 360 believes everyone must be able to access it.

“When adolescent girls have access to quality education, they are better equipped to lead healthy lives and build futures that are meaningful to them.

“At FHI 360, we know that a lot can stand between a girl and education. We are proud that our work is helping to close the ‘adolescent girl gap’ and enable more girls to stay in and complete school — and to achieve their goals.”

Tessie San Martin
FHI 360 Chief Executive Officer

There are 600 million adolescent girls worldwide — and each one of them deserves access to quality education. But often adolescent girls (ages 10–19) are grouped with women or children. This makes it difficult for education programs to reach adolescent girls, who already face numerous barriers to education, including violence and discrimination, as well as a lack of safe transportation and adequate school facilities. These factors create an “adolescent girl gap” in education — with lifelong implications for their health and social, economic and educational development. Adolescent girls with disabilities and gender and sexual minorities are particularly affected by these barriers.

No matter the obstacles, FHI 360 strives to connect adolescent girls around the world to greater opportunities for education, so they can pursue the future they want.

Improving adolescent girls' education benefits not only girls' economic standing but also their health, well-being and social protection — and reduces the risks of child marriage and early childbearing.



Barriers that can stand between a girl and education

Physical, economic and social barriers can prevent adolescent girls from receiving the education they deserve. FHI 360 recognizes the obstacles that adolescent girls can confront when trying to access education — and strives to equip them with what they need to overcome them.



Conflict and crisis

Countries experiencing high levels of conflict tend to have the largest gender gaps in education. Adolescent girls are especially vulnerable to sexual violence during conflict and forced displacement — and they are more likely than boys to drop out of school during crises.



Child marriage/early pregnancy

Millions of girls in early adolescence are married every year. Many of them leave school and become pregnant at a young age. Girls who become pregnant may be forced to drop out of school or forbidden to return after they have given birth.



Economic barriers

Low-income households can lack the resources to pay for schooling and the costs associated with it, such as textbooks, uniforms, school supplies and transportation. They may choose to invest in boys' education, relying on girls to help with household chores, take care of younger siblings — and eventually get married.



Gender-based violence

For adolescent girls, the fear or actual experience of violence is associated with lower school attendance and learning outcomes. Girls with disabilities and gender and sexual minorities are disproportionately affected by sexual and gender-based violence in school.



Health and well-being

Adolescent girls have reported feelings of stress, shame, embarrassment, confusion and fear due to a lack of knowledge of and ability to manage their menstruation. These feelings can cause them to miss weeks of school every year.



Disability

Children and adolescents with physical and intellectual disabilities are more likely to experience physical and sexual violence than other children. Moreover, school environments are often unfriendly, with inaccessible classrooms, playgrounds and toilets, as well as teachers and administration who may be untrained in inclusive practices.



Lack of agency

Adolescence can be a time when others (for example, parents, family members, religious entities and community members), and not the girls themselves, decide what happens in girls' lives. This disempowerment can contribute to low self-esteem, which in school may be reinforced by a lack of inclusive, learner-centered teaching materials and inspiring female role models.



Meeting girls where they are

In Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean, FHI 360 works side by side with ministries, communities, schools, teachers and families to create education systems that support students to stay in school, complete their education and achieve their goals. Our programs in Senegal, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria work to address the specific challenges adolescent girls face in accessing and completing their education.



USAID PASSERELLES

Senegal

2018–2023, FUNDED BY U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (USAID)

Significant challenges to equitable access to education — including poverty, safety and educational quality — persist in post-conflict regions of southern Senegal. Implemented by FHI 360, USAID Passerelles (“gateway” in French) works to improve access to high-quality, relevant education for more than 259,000 children and young people in four regions in Senegal. The project strengthens and extends complementary basic education services; improves the relevance, quality and inclusiveness of formal education; and empowers families and communities to recognize their voice in and ownership of local education services. Through Passerelles, girls are supported to successfully transition from primary to secondary school.

High-quality, relevant education for more than

259,000

children and young people in four regions of Senegal.



Elimu ni Jibu reaches more than

250,000

children and young people.

FHI 360 has set up more than

900

nonformal learning centers.

ABOUT FHI 360

FHI 360 is an international nonprofit working to improve the health and well-being of people in the United States and around the world. FHI 360 partners with governments, civil society organizations, the private sector and communities to create jobs, educate children, provide lifesaving health care and bring about positive social change. FHI 360 leverages research and evidence to provide a 360-degree perspective to respond to the world's toughest human development challenges.

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ELIMU NI JIBU

Democratic Republic of the Congo

2020–2025, FUNDED BY USAID

Decades-long conflict, the Ebola epidemic and natural disasters have jeopardized students' access to quality education that meets their academic and psychosocial needs. The Elimu ni Jibu ("education is the answer") project engages local partners to create solutions to barriers that prevent students from accessing education and to help increase their sense of social safety and well-being.

Through Elimu ni Jibu, FHI 360 aims to reach more than 250,000 children and young people. Using a gender-equitable and locally focused approach to create school safety plans, the project has also facilitated the development of Girls Leading Our World clubs to provide a safe space for girls to build leadership skills and a sense of self-worth.

ADDRESSING EDUCATION IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA

Nigeria

2018–2021, FUNDED BY USAID

In Northeast Nigeria, thousands of schools have been destroyed or forced to close due to a decade-long insurgency. To meet the immediate educational needs of more than 302,000 children and teenagers, FHI 360 has set up more than 900 nonformal learning centers in 150 communities through the Addressing Education in Northeast Nigeria program. These centers offer a compressed curriculum in local languages, basic literacy, numeracy and social and emotional learning.

In the first year of the program, learners showed improvement in both literacy and math levels, with boys' fluency increasing by 10 words per minute and girls' fluency increasing by 14 words per minute, nearly compensating for the initial gender disparity in literacy. By supporting government capacity to collect and analyze education data, the program continues to address gender disparities.

