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Annual report on the implementation of the UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025

Summary

The UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025 specifies how UNICEF will accelerate progress on gender equality across the five Goal Areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 and within its institutional systems. The present document is the second annual report on the implementation of the Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025 and includes an update on the Plan's priorities, indicators and performance benchmarks.

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I. Overview

1. With less than seven years to go to meet the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, the rights of girls and women continue to be under threat. Escalating global challenges such as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and its aftermath, climate change and conflict have created a polycrisis that is widening gender disparities and deepening deprivations for girls and women in many areas. Adolescent girls are especially vulnerable. Prior gains on gender equality and the rights of girls and women are at risk of being rolled back in many countries, fuelled by rising authoritarianism and misogyny.¹ The latest Gender Social Norms Index report found no improvement in biases against women over the last decade², and United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres argued at the opening of the sixty-seventh Commission on the Status of Women that “progress won over decades is vanishing before our eyes”.³

2. Against this backdrop, UNICEF and partners are responding by intensifying investments and actions to reclaim progress and move the needle more decisively towards gender equality. The UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025 articulates a series of time-bound programmatic and institutional targets to achieve more transformative, lasting change. By the end of 2023, the midpoint of the Plan, there were notable gains in many areas, with UNICEF either surpassing or almost meeting its milestones, all of which are embedded in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025. More UNICEF-supported countries scaled up efforts to professionalize the health workforce, including community health workers – the majority of whom are women. Higher levels of utilization of maternal health care were reported. Record numbers of women, girls and boys were reached with protection and gender-based violence services, and millions of women and girls and their families benefited from safer and more inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) systems and services. The number of UNICEF-supported countries that recorded gender-integrated social protection results has doubled since 2021, and almost triple the number were supporting gender-equitable care work through policy reform.

3. Dedicated and multifaceted programming for and with adolescent girls expanded in 2023, framed by the UNICEF Adolescent Girls’ Strategy. Country offices reported improved services and access for adolescent girls, including co-created mechanisms for and with girls to influence policymaking. Gains were made in adolescent girls’ maternal care and anaemia prevention, as well as in their skills development, civic participation and leadership. Millions of adolescent girls benefited from interventions to protect them from child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM).

4. Institutionally, UNICEF also met key benchmarks in priority areas, including more gender analyses, more intentional integration of gender considerations in programmes and improved accountability for gender results. UNICEF has achieved gender parity in its staffing globally and continues to refine its policies to make the organization a more inclusive and transformative workplace.

5. Nevertheless, challenges remain. Programmatically, while UNICEF targets are on track to be met, investments in the rights of girls and women are constrained. A

¹ United Nations, Women and peace and security: report of the Secretary-General, S/2023/725, United Nations, New York, 2023.

² United Nations Development Programme, 2023 Gender Social Norms Index: Breaking down gender biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality, New York, 2023.

³ United Nations, ‘Secretary-General Warns of ‘Baked-in’ Gender Discrimination in Technology, Decries Rights Roll-Backs, Opening Commission on Status of Women’, SG/SM/21713, press release, 6 March 2023.

lack of resources for girl-focused programming undermines the potential for bold system reforms, especially in middle-income country contexts. Vital data gaps, especially on younger adolescents, continue to stymie policy efforts. Gender expertise in UNICEF is still insufficient to meet demands in programming, for example to assist Governments and other partners in taking forward the results of gender analyses. In humanitarian contexts, intentional gender-responsive programming and reporting is not yet systematic, despite advances in emergency preparedness. UNICEF is performing well against United Nations targets, but there are gaps that require consistent attention. This includes, for example, addressing the retention and promotion of women, and addressing the greater concerns expressed by female staff around well-being, trust and psychological safety compared to their male counterparts.

II. Introduction

6. The UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025 specifies how the organization will advance gender equality across its work, in alignment with the UNICEF Strategic Plan for the same period. It operationalizes the UNICEF Gender Policy, 2021–2030, emphasizing the transformation of the underlying structural barriers that perpetuate inequalities.

7. This report reflects overall trends in UNICEF successes and challenges in achieving gender results in the first two years of the Gender Action Plan cycle, with an emphasis on programming interventions in 2023.

III. Programmatic results

8. Recognizing that gender discrimination has lifelong and intergenerational impacts, the Gender Action Plan employs a dual-track approach that both (a) advances gender equality throughout the life course, and (b) promotes targeted actions to advance the leadership and well-being of adolescent girls. All UNICEF programmatic gender priorities are supported by the organization’s work in advocacy, innovation, partnerships, data, research and analysis.

Figure I
Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025: programmatic priorities



A. Integration of gender equality across the life course

1. Maternal health and nutrition, including HIV testing, counselling and care

9. UNICEF continued to make advances in health-related outcomes for women and girls, with overall gains in service delivery, broader health systems strengthening, promotion of health-seeking behaviour, enhanced partnerships with local networks of women and girls, and the use of digital outreach and delivery methods.

(a) Quality and dignified maternal care and nutrition

10. Through the Every Newborn Action Plan and the Ending Preventable Maternal Mortality initiative, UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Health Organization (WHO) continued to lead actions to advance the global maternal and newborn agenda, leading to significantly stronger service delivery and improved quality of maternal and primary health care over the past two years. In 2023, 77 countries were supported to strengthen delivery of quality maternal and newborn care, almost double the number in 2022. Almost 24,000 UNICEF-supported health-care facilities improved their quality of care, compared to 8,600 in 2021. In addition, UNICEF support contributed to strengthened systems for primary health care in 124 countries in 2023, up from 97 countries in 2021.

11. Some 34.1 million live births were delivered in health-care facilities through UNICEF-supported programmes, exceeding the milestone set for the year. The percentage of live births attended by skilled health personnel increased from 81 per cent in 2021 to 85 per cent in 2023. The percentage of pregnant women receiving at least four antenatal care visits went from 66 per cent in 2021 to 69 per cent in 2023, while those receiving postnatal care went from 68 per cent in 2021 to 69 per cent in 2023. The pattern of slight increases was mirrored among pregnant and parenting adolescent girls, representing progress from the more stagnant results of previous years.⁴

12. In 2023, UNICEF recorded increases in anaemia prevention coverage and in the number of national policy reforms tackling undernutrition. The percentage of pregnant women who benefit from UNICEF-supported gender-responsive programmes for anaemia prevention increased from 37 per cent at baseline to 45 per cent in the most recent estimates. Integrated, gender-transformative approaches are helping to address the impact of discrimination on the nutritional status of women and children. For example, linking anaemia prevention and nutrition counselling with caregiver support helps to promote gender-equitable nutrition practices in communities. This may include engaging male caregivers in child feeding and care and supporting women's agency in making decisions about family nutrition. In Liberia, a UNICEF-supported strategy to reverse malnutrition in women and children led to over 112,000 pregnant women and 192,000 adolescent girls receiving iron and folic acid supplementation by the end of 2023.

(b) Community health workers

13. UNICEF scaled up support for a professional health workforce, supporting capacity development programmes for front-line workers in health, nutrition and HIV in 92 countries (up from 62 in 2021). This included community health workers – a majority of whom are women. Community health workers play a vital role in delivering essential health services and information, often in hard-to-reach communities and in challenging emergency contexts. About 1.1 million health

⁴ Baselines and 2023 values for maternal care have been updated based on new annualized modelled estimates.

workers received skills and support for delivering essential maternal, newborn and child health services through UNICEF-supported programmes in 2023. These programmes have reached a total of 2.3 million workers since 2021. In Yemen, UNICEF supports more than 3,200 women community health workers from rural communities with training and financial incentives. In 2023, as part of enhanced skills development, 160 women from this cohort were enrolled in midwife training. Once they have completed the training, the community health workers can help to deliver life-saving reproductive health-care services in hard-to-reach areas.

(c) Gender-responsive adolescent health

14. In 2023, UNICEF supported government partners in 41 countries (up from 27 in 2021) to integrate adolescent health priorities, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, in primary health care services, or through school and digital platforms. Strategic interventions in several countries are addressing the demand for and quality of gender-responsive and adolescent-friendly services and promoting health-seeking behaviour among adolescent girls and boys. In Argentina and Peru, for example, UNICEF support to the Government helped to develop core health indicators and standards for adolescent care – including on topics such as gender and masculinities, gender diversity, violence detection and comprehensive sexual education. In Peru, the new indicators and standards contributed to a 40 per cent increase in adolescent health coverage and an increase in adolescent mental health care coverage, from 6 per cent in 2021 to 8.3 per cent in 2023.

(d) Gender and immunization

15. At the global level, while there is no significant difference in immunization coverage for boys and girls, there are still gender dimensions to vaccine access and coverage, whether it is women’s decision-making power in a household, the workload and salaries of women vaccinators, or the value placed on girls in some communities. In partnership with Canada’s Global Initiative for Vaccine Equity, WHO and other partners, UNICEF helped to develop key gender-related tools to inform analyses and created standardized core indicators to track gender-related results in national immunization and health programmes. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, UNICEF is supporting the meaningful participation of women and girls in routine immunization efforts – 48 groups of women and girls were involved in gender analysis of barriers to immunization and follow-up activities will promote their leadership in community mobilization activities.

(e) HIV prevention and care

16. A core focus for UNICEF in its work on HIV/AIDS is the triple elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, syphilis and hepatitis B. Policies and services for the elimination of HIV and syphilis are now in place in 36 of the 37 UNICEF HIV priority countries and in some of these countries national plans also include the elimination of hepatitis B. Antiretroviral therapy coverage of HIV-positive pregnant women globally remains above 80 per cent.

17. Despite this progress, there are pernicious gaps. In some contexts, although HIV prevalence is low, pregnant women face limited access to services for the prevention of mother-to-child-transmission of HIV. Data from 23 countries indicate that efforts towards triple elimination have slowed in most places. In 2022, outside of sub-Saharan Africa at least one in three pregnant women living with HIV was not receiving antiretroviral treatment. Low awareness and a lack of political commitment, coupled with limited community engagement, partly explain the gaps in treatment and delayed progress towards key indicators.

2. Gender-responsive education systems and equitable education access for all

18. The crisis in learning continues to impede progress towards meeting Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education for all children. Globally, the number of out-of-school children has risen to 250 million, largely due to the exclusion of girls and the education crisis in Afghanistan. Globally, for every 100 young men completing upper secondary school, 105 young women complete upper secondary, while in sub-Saharan Africa, which remains the region where young women face the largest disadvantage, only 88 young women complete upper secondary school for every 100 young men doing so.⁵ Yet, globally, some 35 per cent of adolescent girls and young women aged 15 to 24 years are not in employment, education or training, more than double the rate of their male peers (14 per cent). This highlights the ongoing need to support girls with the relevant skills needed for meaningful employment.

19. UNICEF continued to prioritize equitable access to education in 2023. With UNICEF support, 37.7 million out-of-school children and adolescents (51 per cent girls) accessed education in 2023, including 3.1 million children on the move, 17.7 million children in emergencies, and 274,000 children with disabilities. UNICEF support during emergencies extended learning opportunities to 296,412 vulnerable children (48 per cent girls).

20. The percentage of countries with gender-responsive systems for education access increased from 38 per cent in 2021 to 53 per cent in 2023. In Benin, UNICEF is supporting the Government to facilitate access and retention of 130,000 girls aged 9 to 15 years in school using monthly monetary transfers. This programme initially aimed to reach 29,000 girls, and has since been scaled up to cover almost 12 per cent of all girls in this age group in Benin.

21. The gender digital divide has come into focus since the COVID-19 pandemic – 90 per cent of girls and young women aged 15 to 24 years in low-income countries are offline, compared to 78 per cent of their male peers. In 2023, in 65 UNICEF-supported countries, 17.8 million children accessed education through digital platforms (about 5 million girls in countries with sex-disaggregated data). UNICEF assisted Governments to develop digital education policies, train teachers and strengthen national digital learning platforms, as well as to develop educational content and tools focused on gender equity to challenge stereotypes that pose barriers to girls' access and opportunities.

3. Addressing violence against girls, boys and women and ending female genital mutilation

22. The escalation of armed conflicts and climate-related crises has increased the risk and occurrence of various forms of violence faced by women, girls and boys, and strained resources globally for response and prevention. In 2023, UNICEF and partners, through multifaceted programmes in 105 countries, assisted 4.5 million children experiencing violence with access to health, justice and social welfare services (51 per cent girls in countries with sex-disaggregated data).

23. The shift towards a more intentional gender-transformative approach to violence prevention is gaining momentum. This critically challenges the discriminatory gender norms and uneven power dynamics that condone and fuel violence. For example, 1 in 3 adolescent girls and boys still believe that husbands are justified in beating their wives, a proportion that has remained unchanged for several years. Parenting support as a transformative violence prevention strategy, incorporating social and behavioural

⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *2023 Global Education Monitoring Report: Technology in education: a tool on whose terms?*, UNESCO, Paris, 2023.

change approaches, is expanding and reached 11.8 million parents and caregivers across 85 countries in 2023.

(a) Gender-based violence in emergencies

24. In 2023, UNICEF scaled up its efforts to address gender-based violence in emergencies, reaching over 23 million people through response, prevention and risk mitigation programmes in 77 countries. Approximately 490,000 girls benefited from individual case management in humanitarian situations. In Ukraine, over a million people were reached with gender-based violence interventions; and specific support to survivors reached over 90,000 girls, boys and women, through case management and mental health and psychosocial support, health services and safe referrals.

25. UNICEF and partners continued to use innovative and integrated platforms to address gender-based violence, including through technology and digital channels. Laaha, an interactive online safe space, operates in Ecuador, Iraq, Lebanon, the State of Palestine, Ukraine and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), and was designed by and for women and girls. It provides essential information on sexual and reproductive health, mental health and gender-based violence – including how to report incidents of violence and get support services. In South Sudan, gender-based violence risk mitigation interventions were integrated in nutrition service delivery and early results are promising. Cross-referrals between the two sectors have increased; women and girls reported feeling safer and attending nutrition facilities and there have been positive changes in household- and community-level dynamics linked to violence.

(b) Ending female genital mutilation

26. In 2023, UNICEF, through the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation, reinforced its support for Governments to enhance programming and partnerships across various sectors, including health, social services, and gender and social protection. Collective efforts under the joint programme and beyond have provided protection and prevention services to 603,270 girls and women in 20 countries, significantly expanding the reach in emergency settings, and engaged 4.9 million people in reflective dialogues to abandon FGM across 19 countries. In Burkina Faso, FGM services were successfully integrated into settings for internally displaced people, and 18,060 service providers received training on FGM screening and referrals. Similarly, in Somalia, FGM prevention and care were incorporated into the national humanitarian response plan and the educational curriculum of 20 universities. In Nigeria, UNICEF trained 300 FGM survivors and young women leaders in digital and social media skills. Their involvement helped to grow the Movement For Good to End FGM campaign across 20 communities in four states with high FGM incidence, inspiring over 630,000 pledges to eliminate FGM.

4. Equitable water, sanitation and hygiene systems

27. Across more than 100 countries, UNICEF continued to work towards providing equitable and inclusive access to safe WASH services, with a renewed focus on reaching women, girls and persons with disabilities. In 2023, through UNICEF-supported programmes, over 21 million people gained access to at least basic sanitation services (10.8 million women and girls), nearly 36 million to safe water (18 million women and girls in countries reporting sex-disaggregated data), and over 24 million people to basic hygiene, exceeding the Strategic Plan milestones for 2023 in all three areas. To address the growing impact of climate change on the availability of water resources, in 2023, nearly 2,800 solar-powered water supply systems were

installed across 56 countries to improve reliability and proximity, particularly benefiting women and girls who are the primary carriers of water.

28. UNICEF also continued support for gender-responsive WASH sector governance and systems-strengthening to increase women's meaningful participation in management and planning. In Burkina Faso, for example, this has contributed to women and girls holding more than 40 per cent of positions of responsibility in local water management committees and school WASH clubs. Furthermore, sanitation financing and loans are increasingly geared towards women, which has led to increased toilet construction, improved loan repayments and broader benefits such as gender mainstreaming in WASH policies.

29. UNICEF continued to support national Governments to address gender disparities in the WASH workforce. In Papua New Guinea, based on a study identifying barriers to entry and participation, UNICEF is supporting a Women in WASH network that advocates for more opportunities for girls and women in the sector and for gender integration across WASH policies and programmes.

30. Improving gender- and disability-inclusive WASH services and systems in schools and health-care facilities remained a central focus of UNICEF efforts in 2023. Sanitation facilities for example, were single-sex, disability-inclusive (i.e. stalls with ramps and handrails) and included menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) facilities so that women and girls could have safe, private spaces. Almost 3,250 health-care facilities – in both development and humanitarian contexts – were supported in 2023 to reach basic WASH standards – which is critical given the role of quality WASH in reducing both maternal and newborn mortality rates. Additionally, 7,553 schools were also supported to reach basic WASH standards.

31. In humanitarian contexts, UNICEF-supported programmes to ensure safe and equitable access to water reached 21.8 million girls and women (out of a total of 42.4 million people in need reached), while sanitation programmes reached 5.5 million girls and women (out of a total of 10.9 million people in need reached). UNICEF provided large-scale emergency support in Nigeria, the Sudan, Ukraine and Yemen, providing displaced and affected populations with gender-segregated sanitation, hygiene and MHH services, including emergency latrines and bathing shelters.

5. Gender-responsive social protection systems and gender-responsive care work

32. With more than 1.77 billion children worldwide lacking access to social protection, UNICEF worked with government partners to inclusively expand coverage for girls and boys in 2023 and ensure that social protection systems are gender-responsive or transformative. The results are promising. In 2023, 46 UNICEF-supported countries had gender-responsive social protection programmes contributing to transformative gender equality results, an increase from 22 in 2021.

33. UNICEF continued to prioritize strengthened integrated sectoral services and their increased availability to the most vulnerable, including women-headed households, displaced families and women and children with disabilities. The economic security of at-risk adolescent girls is also increasingly a focus. In India and Nepal, UNICEF support contributed to the expansion of government-led girl-centred cash transfer schemes to reduce child marriage and increase school enrolment, reaching nearly 2.5 million girls. Similarly, with UNICEF support in Uganda, the Kampala City government's programme Girls Empowering Girls is using cash plus transfers through combined education, training and mentoring interventions to ensure safe transitions to adulthood for adolescent girls.

Addressing the global care crisis

34. Unifying social protection with other sectors to deliver inclusive care and support systems to benefit children and caregivers can reduce gender inequities and lead to transformative outcomes for women and girls, who still shoulder the lion's share of caregiving globally. In 2023, UNICEF played an important role in shaping Human Rights Council resolution A/HRC/54/L.6/Rev.1, Centrality of care and support from a human rights perspective, and launching the first ever International Day of Care and Support (29 October) to ensure children and adolescent parents are not forgotten on the global care agenda.

35. In 2023 with UNICEF support, 37 countries were taking action to address care work through family-friendly policies, up from 13 in 2021. Interventions helped to promote positive gender norms around equitable relationships, as well as supportive employment environments so women and men can balance paid work and domestic responsibilities. For example, the Government of the Plurinational State of Bolivia is developing a national public policy on care to equalize caregiving responsibilities within families; while in China, maternity provisions were incorporated into national health insurance for formal sector employees, benefiting more than 245 million women in 2023.

36. UNICEF also continued to support transformative parenting and caregiving programmes, with an emphasis on male involvement in caregiving and equitable sharing of family responsibilities by men and women. For example, the Playful Parenting Programme in Serbia offers integrated care across health, education and social welfare to support the well-being of children and their parents. Innovative counselling and coaching practices that focus on play, gender-responsive parent-child interactions and increased engagement of fathers in child-rearing in early childhood have positively impacted over 35,000 young children and their caregivers. There was a notable increase in the participation of fathers, which rose from 30 per cent in 2022 to 40 per cent in 2023.

B. Adolescent girls' leadership and well-being

37. The UNICEF adolescent girls' agenda is elevating and accelerating programming in all contexts to reduce the disparities adolescent girls face across multiple dimensions of their lives. In addressing their diverse and overlapping needs and vulnerabilities, the agenda is also amplifying girls' voices and agency to ensure that their leadership, participation and creativity are at the forefront of programming solutions for transformative change.

38. The adolescent girls' portfolio is operational in around 46 countries, and nearly 5 million adolescent girls and young women, 4 million adolescent boys and young men and nearly 3 million community members were impacted through interventions supported by UNICEF in partnership with public and private sector partners in 2023. Greater investments are needed, however, both in domestic financing and official development assistance, to further improve programming quality and increase reach and scale.

1. Adolescent girls' health and nutrition, including HIV prevention

39. New estimates show higher levels of access to and utilization of maternal care among pregnant and parenting adolescent girls in 2023, a positive shift from the stagnant levels of recent years. In maternal care: the proportion of adolescent girls (aged 15–19 years) receiving antenatal care in 2023 was 61 per cent, higher than past baseline estimates of 57 per cent in 2021; the percentage of live births attended by skilled health personnel was 78 per cent, higher than the baseline estimate of 75 per

cent in 2021; and the rate of postnatal care was 65 per cent in 2023, higher than the baseline estimate of 62 per cent in 2021. A key contributing factor to these gains was targeted, deliberate investment to close gaps in the sexual and reproductive health needs and rights of adolescent girls, such as access to gender-responsive, adolescent-friendly health-care services, and the removal of barriers to health-seeking behaviour, including discriminatory gender norms.

40. UNICEF supported scaled up action in several countries to promote adolescent girls' agency around their sexual and reproductive health and rights, linked to efforts to address high rates of teenage pregnancy, child marriage and gender-based violence. In the Philippines for example, OKY, a girl-designed puberty and menstrual cycle tracking app, has been integrated into education in schools nationwide to increase adolescent engagement in health-related decision-making. Globally, OKY is available in 17 languages across 13 countries and had 600,000 users by the end of 2023.

41. Globally, almost one in three adolescent girls is anaemic. UNICEF and partners continued to support integrated programming on prevention of anaemia and other forms of malnutrition that addresses the specific nutrition needs of adolescents, appropriate delivery channels and messaging. There were promising results in 2023. Forty-five UNICEF-supported countries had gender-responsive programmes to prevent anaemia in adolescents through school and community-based approaches. Furthermore, in countries with disaggregated data, 29 million girls were reached with iron-folic acid supplementation and other programmes to prevent malnutrition, representing a considerable scale-up compared to previous years. In Afghanistan, where one third of all adolescent girls are anaemic, a UNICEF-supported shift from school- to community-based delivery of iron-folic acid supplementation resulted in 48 per cent of girls in the target group receiving supplementation, more than 10 percentage points higher than in 2022. Women community health workers helped to increase acceptance of the programme and expand its reach to remote communities.

HIV prevention and care and human papillomavirus immunization

42. Adolescent girls, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, continue to be disproportionately at risk of HIV infection. Antiretroviral treatment coverage among 10- to 19-year-olds was under 60 per cent in every region except Eastern and Southern Africa (where it was 70 per cent). Multifaceted, integrated and gender-transformative strategies are critical to protecting and supporting girls and young women, including pregnant and parenting adolescents. UNICEF partners with community-based networks of adolescents and young people through peer-led and mentoring programmes to promote HIV testing and access to care, and to connect young people to treatment and mental health services. In 2023, 32 out of 37 UNICEF priority countries implemented combination HIV-prevention interventions that focused on adolescent girls and young women and/or young key populations.

43. Building on more than 40 years of multisectoral response to HIV, UNICEF uses bundled or 'plus' interventions like the Ujana Salama programme in the United Republic of Tanzania, which combines economic and health components to improve well-being, reduce HIV risk and improve sexual and reproductive health, while addressing the compounded vulnerabilities faced by adolescent girls and young women. Cash transfers, gender-responsive training and mentoring, and links to adolescent-friendly health services are resulting in increased economic activities by girls, more health-seeking behaviour among boys and reductions in sexual violence against girls.

44. Globally, only one in eight girls is vaccinated against human papillomavirus (HPV) – the leading cause of cervical cancer. Global momentum around HPV vaccination programmes had been growing, only to be severely curtailed during the

COVID-19 pandemic. UNICEF and partners have been working to reinvigorate efforts. In 2023, UNICEF procured HPV vaccines for one in four countries worldwide. In 2023, in collaboration with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and several Governments, UNICEF launched an HPV+ initiative in the 21 Gavi priority countries. The initiative will use targeted investments to support countries to introduce the HPV vaccine, generate demand or improve its coverage, while also providing additional health, education and empowerment integrated, girl-centred interventions with and for adolescent girls.

2. Adolescent girls' leadership, learning and skills, including digital skills

45. UNICEF continued to prioritize skills development for adolescents, covering foundational skills like literacy and numeracy, digital skills, transferable skills such as life skills and socio-emotional skills, and job-specific technical and vocational skills. Skills programmes have vast potential to offer alternative learning pathways, smoothen transitions from education to decent work and support adolescents to benefit from twenty-first century economic opportunities, especially in the digital arena. The need is great, especially for girls, since they remain overrepresented among adolescents who are not in employment, education or training despite advances in their learning access over the past decade. Many UNICEF-supported countries, such as Bhutan, Greece, Pakistan, Republic of Moldova and Viet Nam, have accelerated actions focused on girls from rural and remote areas and refugee communities. For example, UNICEF partnered with the Pakistan Girl Guides Association to provide life skills and leadership training to girls from remote and rural communities through non-formal, interactive and community-focused camps. More than 130,000 girls under 18 years of age benefited in 2023. UNICEF and government partners in Viet Nam are using innovative teaching methods to implement a transformative curriculum – from pre-primary level through to secondary schooling – that addresses gender stereotypes and is benefiting some 4 million girls.

46. In 2023, UNICEF rolled out its new Adolescent Girls' Strategy. More than 46 countries now have dedicated resources to scale up ambitious, multipronged, girl-centred programming in the areas of education and skills, health and nutrition, protection and economic security. Across UNICEF-supported multisectoral, girl-centred programmes, 11.6 million people benefited in 2023. While focused on the specific needs and rights of girls, activities holistically engaged the wider community with the aim of fostering a supportive environment for adolescent girls that also benefits boys and families. Interventions in the Dominican Republic, Indonesia and Morocco for example, improved access to mental health and violence protection services, challenged harmful norms through community dialogues, supported girls' leadership and built capacity for health-care providers, educators, community leaders and parents and caregivers on child rights, adolescent support and gender equality.

47. The UNICEF Skills4Girls partnership with the private sector continued to make advances for girls globally. In 2023, with the support of partners like Clé de Peau Beauté, Chloé and Max Factor, nearly 4 million girls benefited from girl-focused skills programmes, which engaged them in programme design and connected them with mentors, peer networks and the opportunity to develop wide-ranging skills such as digital and green skills. Increasingly, UNICEF is exploring how to gamify and digitalize skills and learning pathways for girls. A gaming-driven curriculum has been rolled out in six pilot countries, Armenia, Brazil, Cambodia, India, Kazakhstan and South Africa. The curriculum involves hackathons for girls to design their own games and mentorship opportunities with a total of 25 local companies, and has a reach of some 10,000 girls, parents and teachers.

48. The leadership and participation of girl-led groups and networks is a critical part of the Adolescent Girls' Strategy. In 2023, three girl-led organizations in Rwanda were supported to amplify their advocacy around teenage pregnancy prevention and support for teenage mothers, which reached over 1 million young people. Pre- and post-surveys showed dramatic changes in young people's knowledge about violence prevention and menstruation. Nearly 22 million adolescents and young people (52 per cent girls) participated in or led civic engagement initiatives (such as consultations, online peer support and developing U-Report initiatives) through UNICEF-supported programmes in 2023.

3. Eliminating child marriage

49. Through the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage and other initiatives, UNICEF and partners continued to expand innovative programme strategies and consolidate global action to end child marriage. In 2023, one in five young women aged 20 to 24 years were married as children versus nearly one in four 10 years ago. Yet progress has been uneven and gains have not been equitable, leaving the most vulnerable girls behind. The poorest adolescent girls and adolescent girls on the move are highly vulnerable to child marriage.

50. In 2023 across 48 countries, UNICEF-supported prevention and care interventions to address child marriage benefited 11 million adolescent girls and engaged 32 million people in reflective community dialogues about discriminatory social norms. In Ethiopia, for example, UNICEF partnered with the Government and feminist, women-led and youth-led organizations to implement varied interventions, including the strengthening of male engagement and community surveillance mechanisms. This resulted in the involvement of 40,800 boys and men in community mobilization and awareness activities, and the identification and cancellation of 8,848 child marriages by law enforcement bodies or communities. Further, at least three-quarters of the target group of adolescent girls reported having more confidence in delaying their marriages; and four in five girls of lower secondary school age who were out of school in target areas re-enrolled in school.

51. Promising results are emerging from use of the UNICEF gender transformative accelerator tool, which is helping country programmes to design and refine their interventions to directly remove barriers to gender equality and change the underlying norms driving child marriage. In Mozambique, for instance, the tool was used to foster critical thinking about positive masculinities in interventions engaging boys and men, and to review the economic empowerment and entrepreneurship training tools to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes and to promote equal opportunities. In India, UNICEF used the tool to inform capacity-building for almost 700 feminist organizations, 20 women-led organizations and 19 youth-led organizations, including youth groups from the LGBTIQ+ community, in gender-transformative programming related to ending child marriage, covering areas such as digital safety, parenting, positive masculinity and employment.

4. Accessible, dignified menstrual health and hygiene

52. In 80 countries, UNICEF-supported MHH services and information benefited 7.9 million girls and women in 2023. Of this number, 5.1 million were in development settings and 2.8 million, including girls and women with disabilities, were in humanitarian contexts.

53. UNICEF prioritizes improving the policy environment to promote wide-scale accessibility and affordability of menstruation supplies, address structural barriers and reduce stigma associated with the MHH needs of girls and women. Sustained policy dialogue in Iraq has laid the groundwork for a national menstrual health and

hygiene plan, while in Mexico, evidence-based support contributed to the adoption of a law on dignified menstruation in 2023. Advocacy around “period poverty” and support for tax reform and provision of free menstrual supplies, particularly for the most marginalized girls and women, have yielded results in Pakistan and the United Republic of Tanzania.

54. Education systems are also paying more attention to the specific needs of girls. UNICEF support to education authorities in Mongolia led to inclusion of MHH requirements in the national guidelines for school dormitories. In Tajikistan, after girls identified MHH as a key barrier to their school attendance, UNICEF and the education ministry developed a first-ever MHH training course for educators.

55. UNICEF also emphasizes public education and awareness-raising about puberty and MHH to dispel misinformation and confront the related gender norms and attitudes that fuel discrimination, especially against adolescent girls. For example, in the Plurinational State of Bolivia gender-transformative MHH interventions that have a particular focus on engaging men, boys and the wider community are helping to break taboos.

IV. Institutional strengthening

56. The Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025 applies a ‘whole-of-institution’ approach to promoting gender equality across UNICEF programmes, internal policies, practices and accountability mechanisms. In 2023, this approach helped UNICEF to perform well on the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, with the organization achieving 94 per cent of all benchmarks, compared to 88 per cent in 2022.

1. From gender-responsive to gender-transformative programming

57. UNICEF uses the Gender Action Plan institutional standard, which is a composite index with benchmarks for country offices to track their efforts to programme in increasingly transformative ways. The benchmarks apply to areas such as management accountability for gender programming, gender analysis, resourcing, partnerships and gender capacity. Nearly one third of country offices (38 of 129) met the standard in 2023, compared to 12 per cent in 2022.

58. UNICEF country offices are demonstrating programmatic shifts from gender-responsive to gender-transformative, as well as more intentional efforts to implement gender priorities. In 2023, 57 country offices developed their own gender action plans compared to 33 in 2022, and 89 countries had incorporated gender analysis into their programme planning documents, 6 more than in 2022. UNICEF Timor-Leste conducted a first-ever joint gender and disabilities review, which allowed for a broader, intersectional analysis of vulnerabilities of the population. In all, 68 country offices reported gender results that were transformative compared to 60 in 2022.

59. In emergency settings, 93 country offices advanced the gender equality priorities in the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, compared to 89 in 2022, demonstrating UNICEF steady commitment to placing girls and women at the heart of emergency response and preparedness planning. Forty-one countries included key actions for gender in their preparedness plans, compared to just four in 2022; and 58 countries conducted rapid gender analyses, nine more than the 49 in 2022. UNICEF also continued to engage and assist in resourcing local organizations led by women and girls. About \$1.08 billion in humanitarian funding was transferred to partners in 2023, of which organizations led by women received 8 per cent (\$82.5 million).

60. UNICEF will accelerate efforts over the next two years to strengthen staff and partner capacity to carry out rapid gender analyses and quality data collection and disaggregation to inform cross-sectoral programming priorities in humanitarian settings. For the health sector, there is now a framework of key considerations to help public health emergency responders mitigate, prevent, and respond to gender-based violence in public health emergencies.

2. Data, research and evidence to support gender equality results

61. In 2023, there were advances in data collection, measurement methodologies, gender analyses and data dissemination to improve the evidence base for gender policy and programming, with a particular focus on adolescent girls. Key efforts included the release of a new module in the UNICEF-supported multiple indicator cluster survey on measuring time use by adolescents. In addition, the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene produced new research on gender inequalities in the WASH sector and is developing indicators for enhanced global monitoring of gender in WASH.

62. Country profiles were developed by UNICEF, providing key impact- and outcome-level data on adolescent girls' well-being for a diverse range of stakeholders. Countries are also carrying out mixed methods research to refine their programming, for example, Mali, Peru and the United Republic of Tanzania, where barriers and motivators associated with girls' voice, agency and resilience were studied; and Egypt and Tajikistan, where monitoring and evaluation systems are being strengthened to track girls' empowerment indicators.

63. UNICEF undertook several cutting-edge gender studies in 2023. For example, *Bridging the Gender Digital Divide*,⁶ examined gender gaps in digital inclusion among youth in low-and-middle-income countries. Another report, *Undernourished and Overlooked*,⁷ revealed that, globally, more than a billion adolescent girls and women suffer from malnutrition. Other critical evidence on gender programming covered how parenting programmes can reduce violence against children and women, the gendered impacts of educational policies and programmes on child labour, effective interventions to prevent child marriage across sectors, the impacts of unpaid care work by girls and women, and how gender-responsive and age-sensitive social protection can mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis.

64. UNICEF continues to make substantial contributions to gender statistics, including as custodian or co-custodian of several Sustainable Development Goal indicators, such as those on skilled birth attendance, child marriage and FGM. Of special note in this regard is the establishment in 2023 of the Child Marriage Data Portal as part of the Child Marriage Monitoring Mechanism, a multi-stakeholder initiative that strives to promote data use to end child marriage and hold stakeholders accountable.

3. Financing

65. A gender equality marker and gender tags are used in tandem for nuanced tracking of expenditures on activities that promote gender equality. In 2023, an estimated 28.7 per cent of total expenditure went towards activities integrating gender into programmes across the Goal Areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025. Gender-transformative expenditures, whose principal objective is advancing gender

⁶ United Nations Children's Fund, *Bridging the Gender Digital Divide: Challenges and an Urgent Call for Action for Equitable Digital Skills Development*, UNICEF, New York, 2023.

⁷ United Nations Children's Fund, *Undernourished and Overlooked: A Global Nutrition Crisis in Adolescent Girls and Women*, UNICEF Child Nutrition Report Series, UNICEF, New York, 2023.

equality, were at 10.6 per cent, representing an increase from 6.2 per cent in 2022. In emergency contexts, gender-transformative expenditure was 13.6 per cent. UNICEF continues to strive to ensure that 15 per cent of all expenditures are gender transformative by 2025.

4. Strategic partnerships and communication

66. Partnerships with other United Nations agencies, national partners, global organizations, civil society and the private sector remain a cornerstone of UNICEF efforts to fulfil its mandate on gender equality and advance the United Nations reform agenda.

67. UNICEF is a member of the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Gender Reference Group, among others. At the country level, UNICEF participates in United Nations country team Gender Theme Groups; works with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance on HPV, gender and equity; and is represented in the United Nations Joint Global Programme on Cervical Cancer Prevention and Control, as well as the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases.

68. Work with the private sector continued to help to scale up initiatives. For example, a partnership between UNICEF and the BMW Group is helping to provide science, technology, engineering and mathematics education and skills development – including mentorships and job shadowing – to youth, especially girls and young women, in Brazil, China, India, Mexico, South Africa and Thailand.

69. Partnerships with women and girl-led organizations are vital. In 2023, UNICEF transferred \$2.99 billion to partners in development and emergency contexts, of which local civil society organizations led by women received 5 per cent (\$160.3 million). In 2023, 71 country offices had established partnerships with grass-roots girls and women's rights groups, 15 more than in 2022.

70. UNICEF continued to emphasize the voices and agency of adolescent girls and women in its media and communications activities, producing hundreds of topical media assets, knowledge products, articles and events in 2023 at headquarters and out of the regional and country offices. UNICEF social media channels saw an increase of 50 per cent of audiences viewing gender-focused content from 2022. For instance, a 60-second video on Skills4Girls by UNICEF partner Max Factor and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Priyanka Chopra Jonas reached over 300 million unique viewers on X (Twitter) and other platforms in 2023.

5. Organizational culture, leadership and accountability

71. UNICEF continued to foster a more inclusive, transformative workplace by refining its family-friendly policies and flexible work modalities, encouraging work-life balance and enforcing zero tolerance for harassment and abuse. These efforts are guided by the UNICEF Gender Policy and the Economic Dividends for Gender Equality Action Plan, and driven by strong senior leadership support.

72. By the end of 2023, 56 per cent of country offices had a quality system in place to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse, increasing from 41 per cent in 2021. To reinforce zero tolerance even further, a tool was introduced for staff to help them to identify and respond to unwanted behaviours they may witness or experience at work; more than 4,000 staff have already used it.

73. Staff surveys reveal continuing gaps between women and men in their perceptions about UNICEF as a workplace that need attention. To address this, a new manager support programme was rolled out in early 2024 to over 6,000 UNICEF

managers with modules on transformational leadership and other topics core to gender equality. Senior leadership dialogues on inclusive leadership will continue to be conducted.

74. Country-level leadership accountability for delivery of gender results and inclusive workplaces are fundamental to driving overall progress on gender equality. Global and regional accountability mechanisms, such as the Gender Equality Steering Committee, help to provide guidance to UNICEF country offices and ensure adherence to standards for delivering on gender equality. At the country level, gender task forces headed by senior managers have proven instrumental to driving results. Three quarters of country offices had appropriate management oversight to support gender results in 2023, and half of all country offices also had clearly defined accountability for gender results within their programme management plans.

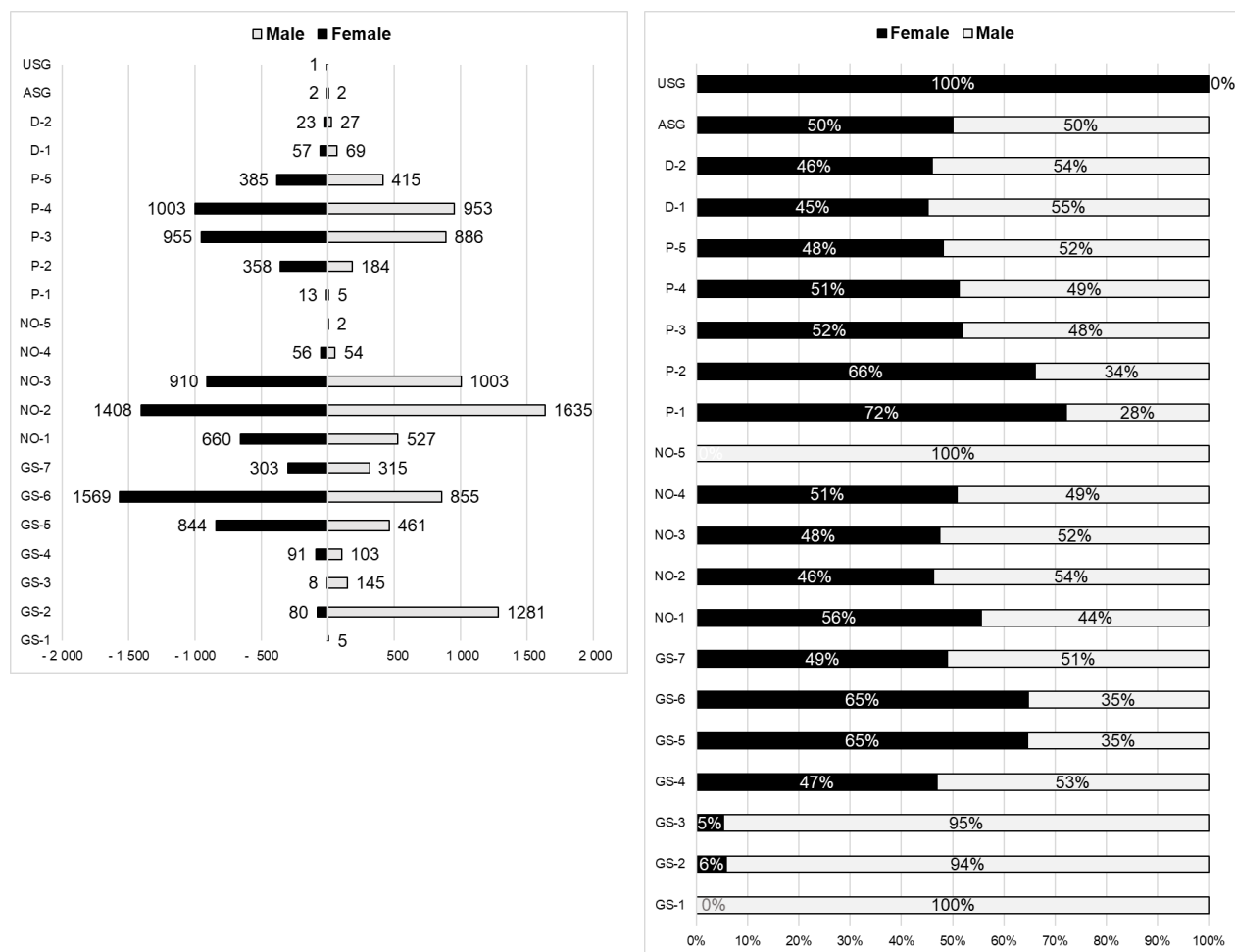
6. Gender capacity and gender parity

75. UNICEF is committed to promoting equity in staffing and career opportunities across all sectors, while also increasing representation of women in senior management and supporting the professional development of young women and gender-diverse staff. UNICEF achieved gender parity in its staffing globally, with 49.5 per cent women (a slight increase from 2022) and 50.5 per cent men in 2023, in line with virtual gender parity (53/47) as defined in the United Nations System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity. More specific gender gaps continue to be monitored, particularly at junior Professional levels (P1–P2) and at senior Director level (D2). The rate of underrepresentation of women in emergency duty stations persists (33.1 per cent women in 2023 compared to 31.5 per cent women in 2022).

76. Measures to address gender staffing imbalances include targeted outreach to recruit women, the creation of junior trainee positions and other pipelines for talented women to transition into staff employment, and enhancing the geographical diversity and number of women in the UNICEF Leadership Talent Group, the main source of candidates for senior posts (42 per cent women in 2023).

77. To mitigate the trend since 2019 of a higher rate of separation from UNICEF by women than men – 53 per cent of total resignations in 2023 were by women – the organization has revised some of its policies to respond to women’s specific concerns around career mobility, relocation, workplace safety and manager support for work-life balance. In 2023, improvements were made to policies on special leave, breastfeeding and flexible work arrangements. Measures undertaken in emergency duty stations included mandatory gender-sensitization training for all staff, increased support to pregnant women and relocation of families to be closer to staff serving at these duty stations.

Figure II
UNICEF staff composition, by sex, December 2023



Note: USG: Under-Secretary-General; ASG: Assistant Secretary-General; D-1 and D-2: Director level; P-1 to P-5: Professional level; NO-1 to NO-5: National Officer level; GS-1 to GS-7: General Service level.

78. UNICEF has invested in strengthening its gender architecture to deliver quality gender results. Since 2021, when staffing guidance was updated to include minimum standards for gender expertise in all offices, a record 100 countries have met staffing requirements. In 2023, there were 40 gender specialists in country offices, compared with 23 in 2022, and approximately 225 gender focal points, an increase from 166 in 2022, with additional sectoral gender focal points continuing to be appointed. There is a need to ensure that appropriately skilled professionals are integrated into sectors, especially at more senior and managerial levels, in order to design and oversee high quality programmes.

79. On organizational learning and capacity, UNICEF is implementing the priorities identified in its learning plan for gender equality, towards expanding capacity for all UNICEF staff beyond gender-designated positions. This includes development of new and improved resources, such as sector-specific and simulation-based training materials for staff and partners; and expanded staff access to GenderPro (the UNICEF global accreditation course on the basics of gender equality) including through multiple language versions. In 2024, UNICEF will explore options for all-staff

mandatory training on gender equality as well as gender-responsive leadership, learning from the experience of the United Nations and other partners.

V. Lessons learned and the way forward

80. In the second year of implementation of the Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025, it is evident that UNICEF programmes and institutional systems are more gender-responsive, with visible results for women and girls. UNICEF offices are increasingly investing in gender analyses, including in humanitarian action, to inform programme priorities. Partnerships with women’s organizations and girls’ organizations are being nurtured, especially as part of broader emergency preparedness efforts. With stronger country leadership, supported by regional office management, planned results have exceeded milestones in several areas.

81. More girls and women are accessing better quality services for maternal care and nutrition, education, protection, WASH and social protection. Multi-faceted programming for and with adolescent girls has expanded rapidly, far exceeding the targets for country-level reach. The establishment of an adolescent girl advisory group sets an important precedent for girl-led programming, feedback and policy advice in UNICEF, putting into action policy advice UNICEF provides to national Governments on the importance of engaging girls in policy formulation and across the programme cycle. The year 2023 saw the introduction of many new girl-focused policies and initiatives in low- and middle-income countries, spurred by UNICEF-supported pilot programmes and technical advisory assistance.

82. UNICEF will now focus on taking these gains to scale, leveraging domestic resourcing and official development assistance for adolescent girls, including their networks and organizations. Transformation will require deepened, more explicit and targeted commitments by all partners (public, private, philanthropic) if the Sustainable Development Goals for girls and women are to be achieved. The convening role played by UNICEF, which brings partners together for collective action on this agenda, will continue to be critical. Internally, UNICEF cannot lose sight of its important role in the broader United Nations reform agenda, particularly in follow-up to the independent review of the United Nations system’s capacity to deliver on gender equality. Vocal, regular communication by senior leadership at UNICEF on gender equality and the rights of girls and women at all levels, and modelling that change internally, is essential.

83. Looking ahead, 2024 promises to be a watershed year for learning as UNICEF invests in the second independent evaluation of its gender action plans from 2018 to 2023. UNICEF will leverage learning from the evaluation, and will continue to demand an ambitious and bold vision from itself and its partners so as to deliver real, transformative change for girls and women everywhere.