“In order for my dreams to become true, there should be good education at schools and many books published in the world”

Sesili, 10, is from Tbilisi, Georgia. She attends one of the best schools in the country. Sesili is a bright, responsible, joyful and friendly girl and a talented painter. She is interested in arts and literature. Sesili loves her life and as she says, she will do her best to keep it as beautiful as it is. The most important thing for her is to be sincere and never lie.
Investing in quality education contributes to building human capital.

The situation

Most 10-year-old girls and boys are in school in this region, as they are entering secondary education where enrolment ratios are generally over 90%. The outlook is good for higher education, too. Although enrolment ratios in tertiary education vary widely in the region (see graph), in most countries around 40% or more of high school students continue their education. Young women have a clear advantage in tertiary education: there are more female than male students in all but five of the region’s 19 countries.

Why is it important?

Investing in affordable quality education is key for ensuring that adolescents and young people can fulfil their potential. It also contributes to building a society’s human capital. This is particularly important in countries preparing for the effects of low fertility and population ageing.

Leaving no one behind

Young Roma face multiple barriers in accessing education, and gaps in educational attainment between Roma and non-Roma remain huge. More than 30% of young Roma were found to be without even primary education in some countries in the region, and nowhere did the share of young Roma with a university decree exceed 1%. The price tag for Roma exclusion from education is high: the loss in productivity amounts to up to 3.7% of GDP in Bulgaria, for example, not counting fiscal losses in terms of lower tax incomes and higher social security expenditures.

What needs to be done?

By further improving educational attainment levels and the quality of education, countries in the region can expect significant economic returns of up to 1.7% of annual per capita GDP growth. Investments must go beyond formal schooling, as early childhood experiences greatly affect social outcomes. This includes policies allowing parents to balance work and family.

Gjulsefa, 10, lives with her brother and parents in Skopje, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Her father works as a municipality worker and her mother as a cleaner in Gjulsefa’s school. The family lives in Shuto Orizari, a neighbourhood predominantly inhabited by Roma. Gjulsefa speaks her native Roma language at home, but loves the Macedonian language and wants to become a Macedonian teacher.

“I do not have plans to get married young. I would like to finish my education first”
Child marriage is common in parts of the region, in particular in the Balkans and Turkey, and appears to be on the increase in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Reliable data is hard to come by, as child marriage is generally illegal, often practiced informally, and therefore not officially registered.

Why is it important?
Child marriage is harmful to girls and limits their prospects in life. Getting married early generally means the girls have to leave school, in particular if they get pregnant. This severely restricts their ability to fulfil their potential. And what often begins as a forced arrangement, in many cases leads to exploitation and violence in the households they end up in. Early marriage also often means early child-bearing, with all the additional risks associated for the teenage mother and her baby.

Leaving no-one behind
Intersecting with social exclusion, tradition, poverty and geographic isolation, child marriage is more common among rural communities and among some minority groups, especially Roma. In Serbia, for example, 57% of Roma women were married before age 18 (compared to less than 7% in the overall population); 17% even before age 15.

What needs to be done?
We need far greater engagement in challenging people’s attitudes about child marriage and, more broadly, the status of women and girls. Without this grassroots engagement, including with faith leaders, little will change, and large numbers of girls will continue to see their futures cut off by child marriage.

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Azize, 10, is from Şanlıurfa in southeastern Turkey. She spends most of the year away from home because her parents work as migrant farm workers. Azize helps with taking care of her siblings, cleaning the tent they live in, and many other household duties. But whenever there is time she goes to the temporary school now set up in the tent camp. Her father and her mother, who was 15 when Azize was born, both want her to get a good education, whatever it takes. Azize wants to become a doctor one day.

“I want to be grown up, I don’t want to marry young. I want to have two children, a girl and a boy”
Although teenage pregnancy is on the decline in this region, many more girls still get pregnant and give birth when they are teenagers compared to their peers in Western Europe (see graph). In Azerbaijan and Georgia, the countries in the region most affected by adolescent pregnancy, the teenage fertility rate is about six times higher.

Early child-bearing is associated with higher health risks for both the mother and the baby. Globally, pregnancy and childbirth complications are the second most common cause of death among 15 to 19-year-olds. Teenage pregnancy also often negatively affects the girls’ prospects in life, as many drop out of school and have difficulties finding a job. In many cases, early child-bearing perpetuates poverty and social exclusion across generations.

Some population groups are disproportionately affected by teenage pregnancy. This includes married adolescents (see Child Marriage), adolescents from lower income groups or from rural areas, out-of-school youth, and linguistic, religious and ethnic minorities including Roma. In Serbia, for example, the teenage birth rate among Roma is 157, more than seven times the national rate of 22.

As quality school-based sexuality education rarely exists in the region, introducing such programmes in schools across the region, along with youth-friendly services, is one important way of empowering teenagers to make informed choices and avoid unintended pregnancies. And where teenage pregnancy is the result of child marriage, stronger measures to combat this harmful practice must be put in place (see Child Marriage).
“In the future I want to be a policewoman. Because the police keep order. And I like their uniform”

Akak, 10, is from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. She lives with her father and older brother. Akak goes to school and also helps her father who has a stand at the bazaar. She visits the Centre for Child Protection every day to get food.
The situation

Although girls often do better in school than boys in this region (see Education), there is a clear reverse gender gap when it comes to employment. Far fewer women than men are in formal employment in all countries of the region (see graph). The gap is largest in Turkey, where only 30% of women are in the workforce. In contrast, women’s labour force participation is relatively high – in several cases above the OECD average of 51% – in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and parts of Central Asia, a legacy of the Soviet Union’s efforts to include women in the workforce.

Why is it important?

When more women work, economies grow. Studies show that an increase in female labour force participation results in faster economic growth. And as populations age, increasing the share of women in the workforce helps mitigate the impact of a shrinking labour force. But the effects of traditional gender norms, lack of family-friendly work environments, and traditional gender roles keep many women confined to childcare and housework (see Work-life balance).

Leaving no one behind

Women with low levels of education are more likely to be excluded from the labour market. In Turkey, for example, large-scale migration to the cities meant that many unskilled women formerly working in agriculture are now unable to take up jobs, as the type of work they can get does not pay enough to afford help with childcare and housework.¹

What needs to be done?

Investing in the education and employment opportunities of girls and young women, and making affordable childcare available, are key factors for increasing women’s labour force participation. Paid parental leave also is crucial, but should not be too long because it can otherwise keep women out of the labour market. This needs to go hand in hand with dismantling traditional gender stereotypes that place lower value on girls and women and expose them to harmful practices and violence.

Tina, 10, is from Chisinau, Moldova. Both of her parents work: her mother as an accountant at a research institute and her father as an engineer. Tina spends a lot of time with her 22-year-old aunt and one day wants to become a dressmaker and open her own shop. She would like to have two children when she is grown up.
→ The situation

Although girls and young women in this region are generally well educated (see Education), many of them either never enter the labour market or drop out soon (see Employment). This is often due to the difficulty of combining work and family, as social norms put pressure on women to stay at home, childcare services are rare and expensive, and parental leave arrangements are insufficient.

→ Why is it important?

The high level of education among girls and women presents a huge potential for the region’s social and economic development. But this potential is largely squandered if policies are not in place to allow women (and men) to balance childcare and pursuing their careers. Enacting such policies also helps address concerns over population ageing and shrinking, as it makes it easier for couples to actually have the number of children they desire. Currently, many couples in the region have fewer children than they wished.

→ Leaving no-one behind

Many families, in particular poorer ones, do not have access to childcare services, as many facilities in the region have closed since the 1990s and others have introduced or increased their fees. As a result, enrolment rates are very low (see chart). Parental leave arrangements also disadvantage poorer families: although both parents can take leave in most countries, fathers’ leave is generally only partially paid or not paid at all.

→ What needs to be done?

Work-life policies should ensure that parental leave can be shared, and is taken up, by both parents, and that people have access to affordable quality childcare. This must be part of broader efforts to dismantle traditional gender roles and labour division between men and women.
Olya, 10, is from Donetsk, Ukraine. She was forced to leave, together with her parents, when the regular shelling of the city began in 2014. For a while, the family did not have anywhere to stay and moved from one place to another. Eventually, local NGOs helped Olya’s father to find a job, and the family was able to get an apartment to live in. Olya goes to school and her favorite subject is history.

“The war needs to stop”
The situation

Millions of people in the region are affected by humanitarian emergencies sparked by conflict and natural disasters. Fighting in eastern Ukraine has displaced large numbers of people, and many more have fled to Turkey and other parts of the region from Syria and other countries devastated by war. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable in times of crisis.

Why is it important?

Placing the safety and health of girls and women at the centre of humanitarian responses is important because their specific needs and vulnerabilities are often overlooked. The benefits are immediate, but they also carry over well into the future, as countries rebuild and people reclaim their lives and dignity.

Leaving no-one behind

Crisis situations take a disproportionate toll on women and adolescent girls. They are at heightened risk of unintended pregnancy, maternal death and illness, sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation, as well as sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

What needs to be done?

There needs to be a stronger focus, right from the onset of an emergency, on the specific needs of women and girls. But doing this only when disaster strikes is too late—countries also need to step up their emergency preparedness well in advance.

Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable in times of crisis.

Source: IDMC, UNHCR, end-2015.

Only countries with over 1,000 refugees or IDPs.
“I don’t have the conditions to go to school”

Kejsi, 10, lives in a village in southern Albania. Kejsi used to live in barracks under a bridge with her mother, who collects cans to earn a living. She now lives with her grandmother, but the family still does not have enough money to send her to school. Kejsi wishes her 15-year-old sister, who is married abroad, could come back and live with her. She wants to become a hairdresser when she is older.
The situation

Although Kejsi’s situation is not typical for the region, poverty and social exclusion is a reality for many people, in particular in parts of Central Asia and the South Caucasus where significant segments of the population live on less than USD 3.10 per day.² There are also pockets of poverty in other parts of the region, including among some minority groups.

Why is it important?

Poverty and social exclusion limit the opportunities of young people, especially girls and young women, to fulfill their potential. They often get caught in a vicious cycle involving early marriage and pregnancy, early school drop-out and lack of job opportunities, which in turn further contribute to poverty and exclusion, passed on from generation to generation.

Leaving no one behind

Making sure all girls and young women, including the most vulnerable, have the knowledge and means to protect themselves from unintended pregnancy is one of the key factors for breaking this cycle. It empowers them to decide when to have children, and how many. This increases their chances of getting a good education and finding employment, which in turn helps them invest in the health and education of their own children.

What needs to be done?

Investing in the health and education, including sexuality education, of girls and young women is key for breaking the cycle of poverty and exclusion, and for empowering the current generation of young people to invest in their own children.

1 The World Bank, Poverty and Equity Database.
"I was so happy I was going to have a child. Who cared at all if it was a boy or a girl?"

Ani’s mother

Ani, 10, is from Yerevan, Armenia.

Her father passed away several years ago. She and her little brother are being raised by her mother, Anahit, who runs a small café and crafts shop. Ani has lots of ideas for her professional future, from being an artist to becoming a programmer, but says she does not know yet which of the many options she will want to pursue when she is grown up.
The situation

When Ani was born ten years ago, she – being a girl – was part of a minority. For every 100 girls born in Armenia at the time, there were 115 boys. **Heavily skewed sex ratios like this are not uncommon in the region.** They exist in the South Caucasus and in the Balkans where patriarchal societies place little value on girls and, as family sizes are shrinking, parents engineer the composition of their offspring to make sure at least one of their children is a boy. In fact, **some countries in the region are among those with the world’s highest sex-ratio-at-birth imbalances** (see graph).

Why is it important?

Sex ratio imbalances are not simply a demographic anomaly. They have tangible negative consequences. In Armenia alone, close to 100,000 girls will be “missing” by 2060 if current trends continue. This means **many men will not find a partner; many may go abroad to establish a family.** Neither scenario bodes well for countries already struggling with mass out-migration and population decline. **Experts also expect a rise in crimes such as human trafficking, gender-based violence and forced marriage.**

Leaving no one behind

At the individual level, women in countries where sex selection is practised face intense pressure from family members and the wider community to give birth to a boy. **They may face violence, especially psychological violence, if they fail to deliver a son.** And they may be forced to undergo abortions – sometimes repeated ones – if they get pregnant with an unwanted girl.

What needs to be done?

**Decisive steps need to be taken to combat engrained gender inequalities and discrimination.** This includes school education programmes, awareness-raising campaigns and empowering women at work and in public life. It also includes strengthening women’s financial independence by reforming inheritance laws and pension and other social security schemes. **Financial incentives for families with girls to counterweigh their perceived economic burden can also be effective.** Only by fostering a culture that places equal value on men and women will we see parents fully embracing all their children, no matter their sex.

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**SEX RATIO AT BIRTH IN SELECTED COUNTRIES/TERRITORIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country/Territory</th>
<th>Sex ratio at birth</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Azerbaijan</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>113.8</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>113.5</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenia</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>110.9</td>
<td>2008-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td>110.2</td>
<td>2005-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>110.1</td>
<td>2010-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (Northwest)</td>
<td>110.1</td>
<td>2005-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosovo (UNSCR 1244)</td>
<td>109.6</td>
<td>2008-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>105.3</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sex ratio at birth = male births per 100 female births. Based on birth registration data (estimates in China, India and Vietnam).