**Respect and value girls – they can transform Africa's security and prosperity**

Investment in girls brings socioeconomic benefits, but too many countries lack the political will to bring about equality of opportunity.

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By 2050, Africa will be home to around half a billion girls and young women. If respected and treated as equals, they have the potential to transform the continent’s security and prosperity. This matters because every penny invested in girls’ education, healthcare and social protection benefits society many times over, while failure to invest in girls results in [monumental socioeconomic losses](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jun/28/child-marriage-cost-4tn-by-2030-researchers-warn-world-bank-icrw).

Child marriage alone has resulted in human capital and revenue losses equivalent to three times the entire flow of international aid into the continent. As a mother and grandmother, it weighs heavily on me to see millions of girls [robbed of their futures](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/sep/03/a-race-against-time-the-new-law-putting-somalias-children-at-risk-of-marriage) and the potential of our continent diminished.

New research from the [African Child Policy Forum](https://www.africanchildforum.org/index.php/en/) shows that far too often, to be a girl in Africa means being denied education; getting married too young; sexual and emotional abuse at home and school; being barred from inheriting property; and being last in the queue when it comes to state spending on health, education and social protection. As if that were not enough, the Covid-19 pandemic has [exacerbated](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/sep/07/why-covid-school-closures-are-making-girls-marry-early) the abuse, violence and exploitation suffered by millions of African girls.

But there is cause for optimism. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the [African charter on the rights and welfare of the child](https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/afr_charter_rights_welfare_child_africa_1990.pdf), a ground-breaking regional treaty that has strong support across the continent. Only six of the 55 African Union member states have yet to ratify the charter, and many of its provisions have been adopted into the domestic laws of African nations. There has been progress on a wide range of indicators – infant mortality, child malnutrition, female genital mutilation and child marriage rates have all fallen in the past three decades. Measles immunisation, birth registration and secondary school enrolment (for both boys and girls) have all risen.

The African Child Policy Forum’s Girl-Friendliness Index measures the progress of 52 African governments towards realising the rights of girls. Mauritius, Tunisia, South [Africa](https://www.theguardian.com/world/africa), Seychelles, Algeria, Cape Verde and Namibia all score relatively highly for having advanced the rights of their girls and rank in the “most girl-friendly” category. However, it is no surprise that countries with the highest levels of poverty, conflict and political instability, such as South Sudan, Chad, Eritrea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Niger, Central African Republic and Comoros, have the lowest scores and are thus rated “least girl-friendly”.

It is significant that some under-resourced African countries – including Lesotho and Gabon – performed reasonably well, while others with a relatively high GDP – such as Equatorial Guinea and Botswana – were ranked lower. This suggests that political will and accountability are just as important as increasing budgets for girls’ programmes.

We urgently have to break the cycle of gender-based discrimination and inequality. Girls are key drivers of transformation, and investing in them will trigger a chain reaction that ultimately leads towards a peaceful and prosperous Africa. To achieve this, governments must take urgent action on a number of fronts, starting with passing girl-friendly laws and repealing discriminatory ones. Investment in education should rise to at least 4% of GDP, in health to at least 15% and social protection to 6.4%, in line with International Labour Organization recommendations. This must go hand in hand with increased government commitment to eliminating violence against girls and giving them the space to voice their opinions.

The fact that some African governments have made advancements towards realising girls’ rights and improving their wellbeing proves that given the political will, advances are possible. I applaud those countries that have risen to the top of the table and urge others to follow their example. But to the many who are shirking their responsibility to transform Africa into a continent where girls feel safe, respected and valued, we can no longer tolerate what is entirely unacceptable. Things must change, and they must change quickly.