The girl dividend: why girls matter for economic growth and development

“One year of female schooling reduces fertility by 10 per cent.”
World Bank

Key action points
- Deliver youth-friendly family planning and sexual and reproductive health services for all young people.
- Remove policy restrictions to sexual and reproductive health services, especially those linked to age or marital status.
- Legislate and enforce laws against child marriage, and raise awareness of its negative impacts.
- Empower girls and young women, including wives and young mothers, to stay on at school.
- Implement policies that support young people to get jobs.
Population dynamics – delivering growth and development

Without exception, countries that have completed their demographic transition have experienced economic growth, the rise of productive workforces and more sustainable development than those that have not. The transition of a population from high mortality and high fertility, to low mortality and lower fertility (the ‘demographic transition’), is almost always accompanied by a large generation that, when supported effectively, can deliver substantial growth and development.

We outline how governments can achieve a demographic dividend by empowering girls and young people, and by increasing access to sexual and reproductive health services.

High fertility and youthful populations hold demographic dividends at bay

In 2010, there were 502.5 million children and young people up to the age of 24 years in the least developed countries. By 2025, there will be 631 million, if fertility declines. This assumes that many of the 215 million women who currently lack access to family planning will gain access in the next few years, which is by no means certain.

But even if all women are able to access voluntary family planning, the population will keep growing because mortality will continue to decline and existing children and young people will reach reproductive age. Even if those young people decide to have only two children, and can achieve those desires, overall population size will continue to increase because they account for a large proportion of the population. This is known as ‘population momentum’.

Delays in lowering fertility are pressing burdens for developing countries. When the population is growing quickly, a large part of investment is used to supply the basic needs of the growing population, at an ever-diminishing per capita level. For example, to maintain pupil-to-teacher ratios in the least developed countries, the number of teachers would have to increase by 25 per cent by 2025. As long as women are denied access to family planning, and populations continue to expand, the demographic dividend will not be attained.

Legal and policy barriers also prevent women and girls from participating in education, politics and the economy. Gender-responsive policies and legal reforms must accompany access to family planning.

Delay first births to slow population growth

Empowered, educated and healthy women and girls will help to lengthen the duration between each generation and slow population growth.

Consider two scenarios. In the first, a woman has a child at 16 years old, and that child gives birth for the first time at 16 years old, and so on. After 100 years, there are already six generations, including children of each generation. On the other hand, if a woman has a child at 24 years old, and her child gives birth at age 24, and so on, then there will only be four generations within the century. If childbearing were delayed within every high fertility country, population growth would slow dramatically.

In addition, the 24-year-old woman is much more likely to have graduated from school, to have skills to generate income, to be able to manage natural resources, and to contribute to public life. Compared to the 16-year-old first-time mother, she is likely to have fewer children – this slows population growth and also contributes to national growth and development.

Support girls and young women

The following interventions and programmes for young people represent areas of potential that will deliver significant demographic dividends.

Prevent child marriage

Child marriage almost always results in girls and young women being taken out of school, giving birth at a young age, having many children over their lifetime and/or maternal mortality. Effective interventions include enforcing laws against child marriage; raising community awareness of its negative consequences; supporting parents to keep girls at school; and supporting girls to speak to their parents about their wishes.

Education and employment for young wives and mothers

Girls and young women, when educated and able to work, can earn more money and increase productivity for employers, resulting in widespread benefits. The reverse effect is also true: “One year of female schooling reduces fertility by 10 per cent.” Nigeria would gain the equivalent of US$13.9 billion per year if young women had the same employment rates as young men.

Effective interventions include removing laws or policies that prevent young wives and mothers from attending school; gender-responsive labour policies; ensuring that schools are safe spaces for girls; and policies that promote gender equity within schools.

Populat...
Youth-friendly family planning policies and services

Young men and women currently face significant barriers to family planning, sexuality education, and information on sexual and reproductive health. Of the 260 million women aged 15 to 19 worldwide, about 11 per cent want to use contraception but cannot access it. The age of marriage is increasing, but age of first sex is not, which means an increase in premarital sex. To limit population momentum and give young people reproductive choices, family planning services must be delivered in ways that reflect their circumstances and needs.

Young women know about contraception, but face barriers accessing it

Effective interventions include eliminating laws, policies and practices that limit access to family planning based on marital status or age; making sexuality education and youth-friendly services available to all young people; social marketing to make family planning attractive to young people; and working with parents, educators and youth leaders.

Togo – an inclusive approach to comprehensive sexuality education: case study

Comprehensive sexuality education is an essential intervention to ensure that all young people are empowered to make informed choices and decisions related to sexual and reproductive health and rights. Comprehensive sexuality education provides information and develops critical-thinking skills, confidence, communication skills, decision making capacities, gender equity and rights-based civic participation.

The Association Togolaise pour le Bien-Etre Familial has played a key role in getting comprehensive sexuality education included in the new national primary and secondary school curricula. The Association is working actively with teachers, parents, school associations and religious groups to build capacity to deliver and support sexuality education. The Association’s teacher training was recognized as a key element for the successful adoption of comprehensive sexuality education.
References


Demographic dividend is the window of opportunity that opens up as fertility rates decline, when faster rates of economic growth and human development are possible when combined with effective policies and markets.

Demographic transition refers to the shift of birth and death rates from high to low levels in a population. The decline of mortality usually precedes the decline in fertility, resulting in rapid population growth during the transition period.

Population momentum is the tendency for population growth to continue beyond the time that replacement-level fertility has been achieved because of a relatively high concentration of people in their childbearing years.

Youth-friendly services are services that attract young people, meet their sexual and reproductive health needs, and are acceptable and accessible to young people with different qualities and backgrounds.

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