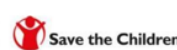


# #GirlsUnite TO SHAPE THE AU-EU PARTNERSHIP



How do we create a meaningful partnership?  
Girls know! These are their demands.

EUROPEAN WEEK OF  
ACTION FOR  
GIRLS



## GIRLS UNITE TO SHAPE THE AU-EU PARTNERSHIP

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## Introduction

In 2021, more than 300 million girls under the age of 18 live in Africa, and this number will increase by 20% by 2030<sup>1</sup>. Girls represent not only the future of the continent, they also have an essential role to play in its present.

On 9 March 2020, the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) published their **Joint Communication Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa**. This document will help tailor the dialogue between the European Union and the African Union around common priorities and contribute to redefining the AU-EU Partnership. On 30 June, the European Council adopted the position of EU member states on the related priorities, restating the importance of a stronger AU-EU Partnership. Finally, in March 2021 the European Parliament adopted its recommendations on the future AU-EU Strategy.

While the EWAG coalition welcomes the mention of **women and youth as key actors** in the EU's Joint Communication, it is imperative that both are mainstreamed throughout the future partnership between Africa and the EU, as they are key driving forces of sustainable development and peace. Moreover, girls face distinct challenges based on their age and gender and their needs often fall through the cracks. The current Joint Communication falls short of responding to these needs.

Girls are disproportionately affected by the current **COVID-19 pandemic**. In March 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, it was estimated that 1.54 billion children and youth were out of school because of COVID-19 related closures, including nearly 743 million girls.<sup>2</sup> Girls and young women themselves have named education as the area of their lives most affected by COVID-19 in a study carried out in 14 different countries.<sup>3</sup> The health crisis is also likely to exacerbate burdens of unpaid care and domestic work on girls. In addition, quarantine measures are putting them at heightened risk of violence at home by family members and are also limiting girls' access to essential healthcare services.<sup>4</sup> This is even more true for women and girls with disabilities.<sup>5</sup>

This means that it has never been more important for the EU to live up to its ambitions and priorities for the promotion of gender equality around the world, enshrined in the **Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) 2020-2025**, now moving into implementation phase. The new funding instrument Global Europe includes ambitious targets on gender equality: 85% of all new external actions will have gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment as a significant objective or as a principal objective, 5% will have it as a principal objective, and at least one action with gender equality as a principal objective will be supported in each country. With the AU-EU Partnership being one of the EU's main priorities, this makes girls' and women's rights one of the key elements of this relationship.

To help properly address these heightened challenges, girls must be heard on what affects them. Therefore, because we believe the voices of youth, and chiefly of girls, should be included in the future of the AU-EU Partnership, our Coalition has strived to centre them in our advocacy work. **The positions developed in this paper have been designed through capacity building with young girls across Europe and Africa.**

We strongly encourage the EU and the AU to hear girls' concerns and needs as well as their proposed solutions by supporting their **meaningful participation** in shaping the AU-EU Partnership. It is not possible to effectively tackle issues affecting girls without them being at the centre of decision-making.

The **European Week of Action for Girls (EWAG)**, that is annually organised to mark International Day of the Girl (11th October), gathers young advocates to advance girls' rights and gender equality in the EU space.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019). [World Population Prospects 2019](#).

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO (2020), [COVID-19 school closures will hit girls hardest](#).

<sup>3</sup> Plan International (2021), [Girls say education is area of life most affected by COVID-19](#).

<sup>4</sup> Plan International (2020), [How will COVID-19 affect girls and young women?](#)

<sup>5</sup> UNFPA (2021), [The impact of COVID-19 on women and girls with disabilities](#).

This year, it is providing a platform for girls to speak out about how the AU-EU Partnership can reflect their aspirations and unlock their potential. It is crucial that the strategy enables dialogue between both regions, allowing for mutual learning and joint and coordinated actions, especially on issues that affect girls and young women both in the EU and the AU - such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), Education and Economic Empowerment and Political Participation. Over the summer of 2021 the EWAG young advocates connected on several occasions to define their recommendations to the EU in four key areas.

### Violence and harmful practices: girls must be free from harm



“Girls in Zambia have been particularly affected with COVID-19 containment measures, resulting in increased gender-based violence. The EU and African institutions should scale up their campaigns to end child marriage, especially in rural areas.” **Dora, 17, Zambia**

Every girl has the right to live a life free from any form of violence and harm and grow up in a safe, peaceful and enabling environment where she can fully exercise her rights.

However, four in ten women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa are married before the age of 18<sup>6</sup>. Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) denies girls their fundamental rights to health, safety, and education: it deprives girls of their childhood. Girls who are married before the age of 18 are less likely to remain in school, more likely to become pregnant in adolescence and to experience domestic violence. It is also estimated that at least 200 million women from 31 countries<sup>7</sup> (27 of which are in Africa) are living with the consequences of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and girls below 14 years old represent at least 44 million of the total figure. Consequences of this practice often include long term physical and psychological trauma, as well as being a prerequisite for other forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) such as child, early and forced marriage. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges: UNFPA estimates that due to COVID-19-related disruption in programmes on FGM and CEFM prevention, an additional 2 million girls will be subjected to FGM by 2030 on top of the 68 million already previously estimated,<sup>8</sup> and an additional 13 million child marriages may occur which could have been averted.<sup>9</sup>



For EWAG young advocates, there is a need for available and geographically accessible support services and safe places within the communities. Youth friendly spaces should empower and engage youth to raise awareness and unify voices, including those who have been affected by SGBV, such as in schools, youth groups and within religious communities. In order to truly address the specific needs of girls, including those unique to rural communities, EWAG advocates emphasise that political pledges regarding SGBV should be backed by funding and informed by thorough research and consultations.

One in four African children are living in conflict, or 170 million, the largest absolute number in the world.<sup>10</sup> Girls living in conflict and humanitarian settings are at a higher risk of experiencing SGBV. This is particularly the case of girls refugees and internally displaced (IDPs). In particular, the lack of age and gender disaggregated data in conflict settings prevent us from understanding the level and nature of girls' specific needs that would ensure appropriate decision-making from the EU and African governments. The lack of reporting, comprehensive data and proper services also apply to development settings, especially in rural and remotes areas, where the lack of safe spaces, adequate services or trained professionals prevent survivors and at-risk population from seeking support needed. According to EWAG advocates, all relevant

<sup>6</sup> Right by Her (2018), [The state of African Women Report](#).

<sup>7</sup> However, recent data shows evidence of FGM being present in over 90 countries worldwide, see [https://www.endfgm.eu/editor/files/2020/03/FGM\\_Global\\_-\\_ONLINE\\_PDF\\_VERSION\\_-\\_06\\_1.pdf](https://www.endfgm.eu/editor/files/2020/03/FGM_Global_-_ONLINE_PDF_VERSION_-_06_1.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> UNFPA (2018), [Bending the curve: FGM trends we aim to change](#).

<sup>9</sup> UNFPA (2020), [COVID-19 disrupting SDG 5.3: eliminating female genital mutilation](#).

<sup>10</sup> Save the Children (2020), [Stop the War on Children 2020: Gender Matters](#).

professionals, such as legal, education and healthcare professionals should receive adequately resourced, sufficient and regular gender-sensitive training on SGBV.

To address these challenges, we recommend that the AU-EU Summit, AU-EU Partnership implementation commits to:

1. **Ensure that the international and regional commitments (at African and European level) to end harmful practices and SGBV are fully respected and translated into concrete and adequately funded actions within the AU-EU Partnership**, in line with the political commitments on gender equality, including through SDG 5, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Beijing Platform of Action and the outcomes of their review conferences and the Gender Action Plan III.
2. **Take extra steps to end harmful practices**, including increased investment in critical youth-centred support and services for survivors of FGM; Urgently increase resources and investment to end FGM and CEFM as well as to support women and girls affected by these harmful practices. The creation of safe spaces for girls in Africa should be supported, through focused projects which encourage girls and young women to speak out, special efforts should be made to reach at risk girls, including those living with disabilities, and survivors in rural areas.
3. **Give special attention to preventing and responding to SGBV against girls, taking a holistic approach**, in the strengthened AU-EU cooperation on peace and security through concrete mutual commitments. This includes allocating funding to initiatives aiming at preventing and responding to SGBV in humanitarian and peacebuilding interventions, ensuring a systematic integration of a SGBV response in every humanitarian and peacebuilding intervention and support to armed forces, as well as providing child and youth-friendly protection services, including psychosocial services, that address the specific needs of girls affected by violence.

## Health and sexual and reproductive health and rights



“The EU should liaise with African governments to make sure girls’ sexual and reproductive health is prioritised and that commitments are implemented, to set the ground for the next generation to be empowered to make choices governing their own bodies and futures.”  
**Mwanaima, 23, Tanzania**

Every girl has the right to lead a healthy and self-determined life. Still, too often girls face multiple barriers preventing them from accessing health services which meet their specific needs.

Girls are disproportionately affected by specific diseases: new HIV infections among young women (aged 15–24 years) are 44% higher than among boys<sup>11</sup>. In addition, 82% of new HIV infections among young women in 2019 were in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>12</sup>, where 7 in 10 girls do not have comprehensive knowledge about HIV<sup>13</sup>.

Moreover, girls face several obstacles to see their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) respected and fulfilled: due to entrenched gender norms and stereotypes, girls are often denied the right to exert control over their bodies and do not have a say in important decisions such as if, when and whom to marry or whether

<sup>11</sup> UNAIDS (2017), [UNAIDS Data 2017](#).

<sup>12</sup> UNAIDS (2021), [Young People and HIV](#).

<sup>13</sup> UNAIDS (2017), [UNAIDS Data 2017](#).

and when to have children. Girls also lack access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) which gives the possibility to young people, and in particular girls, to better understand their bodies and their rights, to address power relations in their lives, and to counter harmful gender norms and stereotypes. For EWAG young advocates, CSE is key to building girls' skills to form healthy, equal, nurturing and safe relationships, free from discrimination, coercion and sexual and gender-based violence.

However, too often, health services, including for SRHR, are not adequate and accessible for girls, who are stigmatised and can face discrimination, violence and coercion. When girls have access to health services that meet their specific needs, they can make choices, exert control over their bodies and exercise their right to health, thus being actors of positive change.

The COVID-19 pandemic has even exacerbated the obstacles for girls and women to access health services, and in particular sexual and reproductive health services. Studies have shown that the pandemic could result in an additional 49 million women with an unmet need for modern contraceptives and an additional 15 million unintended pregnancies over the course of a year.<sup>14</sup>

RECOMMENDATIONS SNAPSHOT

To address these challenges, we recommend that the AU-EU Summit, the AU-EU Partnership and its implementation:

1. **Promote and allocate adequate funding for universal access for girls to youth-friendly health services**, including SRHR and CSE, that are equitable, accessible, affordable and needs-based, including in conflict and humanitarian settings, as well as for communities living in remote or rural areas. This should include funding for grassroots CSOs delivering youth-friendly SRHR services and CSE, as they are key actors to reach out to young people in all areas and contexts, including in schools.
2. **Fight harmful gender norms and laws that prevent girls from accessing the health services they need** to lead healthy and self-determined lives. Make use of the political dialogue between the EU and African countries, as well as of the EU Gender Action Plan III, to support the adoption and implementation of policies in favour of SRHR.
3. **Support African partner countries in responding to the COVID-19 crisis** in a comprehensive manner, including through the strengthening of health systems and universal access to SRHR as part of Universal Health Coverage (UHC).

## Education and Economic Empowerment



“I think the AU-EU Partnership is very important for a lot of topics. For me education is the most important one, because I feel like that will open many other doors and is the first step to equal opportunities and rights for boys and girls, which should be the ultimate goal.” **Gin, 21, Belgium**

Education is one of the most powerful means to achieve gender equality, to acquire literacy as well as life-skills, and to encourage active civic engagement for girls. As the EWAG young advocate stress: across Africa, 9 million girls between the ages of 6 and 11 will never go to school.<sup>15</sup> During conflicts and crises, girls' right to education is severely affected: they are almost 2.5 times more likely to be out of primary school, and nearly 90% more likely to be out of secondary school than their counterparts in countries not affected by conflict.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Guttmacher Institute (2020), *Estimates of the Potential Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sexual and Reproductive Health In Low- and Middle Income Countries*.

<sup>15</sup> UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2019), *Education in Africa*.

<sup>16</sup> UNESCO (2015), *Humanitarian Aid for Education: Why It Matters and Why More is Needed*.

These challenges are heightened for girls with disabilities, who are less likely to go to school and are often considered non-productive members of society. In fact, children with disabilities are 10 times less likely to attend school than those without. Even if they attend school, they are more likely to drop out early while the level of schooling they receive is often below that of their peers.<sup>17</sup> This is an important factor affecting the confidence of girls living with a disability.

“The AU-EU Partnership should address the issue of low self-esteem in people living with disability, in order for them to be more comfortable and confident in themselves.” **Dora, 17, Zambia**

In addition to these existing challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the access to education in Africa, taking a heavier toll on girls. Though schools have now reopened in many parts of the continent, at the peak of the pandemic, an estimated 250 million children from Sub-Saharan Africa were out of school because of COVID-19 related school closures.<sup>18</sup> The EWAG young advocates highlight that girls who do not go to school face a heightened risk of specific barriers such as exposure to child marriage and early pregnancy, and time poverty due to increasing responsibility for unpaid care work. It is estimated that over 1 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa could face challenges in returning to school due to policies and practices that ban pregnant girls and young mothers from attending classes.<sup>19</sup>

Formal and non-formal education, including technical and vocational education and training, supports young women’s successful transition into the labour market. There are currently 9 million unemployed young people in sub-Saharan Africa, and 20% of young people are neither in employment, education nor training (NEETs).<sup>20</sup> Girls face specific obstacles, compounded as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as unequal care responsibilities, unequal access to education and training, occupational segregation, GBV, financial exclusion, and the digital gender gap, which hamper their economic empowerment. These issues are also raised by the EWAG young advocates, who highlight that discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes set the stage for economic and gender-based inequalities. On the other hand, emerging sectors such as the digital sector and the green economy provide new opportunities for young women’s economic empowerment. Digital skills and green skills should be included in education and training, for girls and young women to benefit from and be drivers of these transformations, which are at the moment predominantly male-dominated.



Fragile and emergency contexts further limit young women’s access to economic opportunities and heighten the obstacles, as well as bringing new challenges such as trauma or security concerns that restrict girls’ mobility. A lack of decent jobs and training opportunities may have a negative impact on their future, force them into unsafe, insecure and low paid work, and create further social instability.

<sup>17</sup> Plan International (n.d), [Inclusive Education for children with disabilities](#).

<sup>18</sup> Save the Children (2021), [The impact of COVID-19 on children in West and Central Africa](#).

<sup>19</sup> Global Partnership on Education (2021), [Teacher and learners well-being during the COVID 19 pandemic](#),

<sup>20</sup> See: [Decent Jobs for Youth](#).

To address these challenges, we recommend that the AU-EU Strategy and its implementation:

1. **Promote access to and completion of quality, inclusive education at all levels for all girls and young women**, in safe learning environments, including in conflict and crises settings. The EWAG young advocates highlight the importance of scholarships and making sure girls are safe on the way to and from school.
2. **Take measures to promote girls as drivers of the digital transformation and to address the digital gender divide**, which is as relevant as ever due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Support girls' access to digital devices, and promote digital skills and girls' participation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) subjects, including by tackling occupational stereotypes and gender biases in curricula;
3. **Support young women's economic empowerment by ensuring equal opportunities and fighting gender norms and stereotypes**. Whether it is in education or in the workplace, EWAG young advocates urge the Partnership to address gender norms that confine girls and boys to certain subjects and later, lead to occupational segregation and gender-based discrimination in the workplace. Girls should be empowered to access the job of their choice, including in fragile and forced displacement settings, through quality, inclusive training programmes and skills development (including green skills for a green economy), equal access to productive and financial resources for young women entrepreneurs, and by fighting discriminatory laws and practices (such as the gender pay gap) and ensuring access to decent jobs and social protection.

## Girls' participation and political empowerment



“The AU-EU Partnership should support initiatives championed by young people in Africa. This will increase the participation of young people in community service and will also help make Africa and the world a better place.” **Hiqmat, 19, Ghana**

Some of the most famous young activists changing the world today are girls younger than 18. 76% of girls and young women aged 15 to 25 are motivated to drive social and political change in their homes, communities and beyond.<sup>21</sup> The EWAG young advocates themselves wish to be politically active and to break down the idea that decision-making is not for young people and girls. They believe that youth voices should be heard not only because it is their right, but also to ensure that decisions are fair, representative, and effective in addressing their needs and expectations on issues that concern them.

However, globally youth participation and representation in political processes and policy-making is quite low.<sup>22</sup> Girls face additional barriers to their participation due to negative social norms that discourage them from speaking their minds. For EWAG young advocates, the lack of representation of women in EU and AU/African institutions, and meaningless child and youth engagement mechanisms that do not have a real impact on decision-making, are elements that should be addressed to ensure that young people and in particular girls are inspired to participate in decision-making. This difficult access to political spaces is greater when girls and young women are from marginalised groups. Girls living with disabilities are hardly given a chance to express themselves and have their voices heard.



<sup>21</sup> Plan International (2019), [Taking the Lead Report](#).

<sup>22</sup> United Nations (2016) [World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement](#).





“The AU-EU should consider providing technical equipment to girls with disabilities in order to make them participate more. (...) Children with disabilities especially in rural areas need to be included in decision making and given the chance of expressing themselves.” **Dora, 17, Zambia**

According to EWAG young advocates, this can be improved by running public campaigns on the role of women decision-makers in the institutions, and by putting in place context-specific channels for meaningful and safe youth participation in European and African countries. Another point raised by the EWAG young advocates is the accessibility and visibility of EU youth programmes: they feel that the EU is very far from European youth, and even more so from African youth. EWAG young advocates call for platforms for youth and child participation that would reach young people in their diversity through different online and offline communications, including in schools and in the community.

In addition, young people increasingly express their social and political engagement through protests, campaigns, movements, and youth organisations. In particular, girl-led movements such as Fridays for Future and the work of Vanessa Nakate, the Ugandan young climate activist, have shown the powerful role played by girls and young women in the global fight against climate change. Young people are already active and play an important role in many other topics, such as in peacebuilding and the Youth, Peace and Security agenda, education and the impact of COVID-19, economic rights and sexual and reproductive health rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS SNAPSHOT

To address these challenges, we recommend that the AU-EU Strategy and its implementation:

1. **Lead by example by ensuring equal representation of women and men in their institutions and governments, challenging gender norms around political engagement and inspiring girls to become leaders.** EWAG advocates have highlighted the importance of holding EU and AU decision-makers accountable to attain 50% of women representatives, including in management positions. They also call the AU-EU Partnership to shine light on the essential role played by women, including through public campaigns.
2. **Support decision-makers, from regional institutions, to governments and local authorities to increase safe, inclusive and meaningful participation of girls at every step of the decision-making processes, and to translate their ideas into actions.** EWAG advocates are calling for opportunities for participation and consultation that are adapted to each context, both in European and African countries, that could take the form of regional or local platforms for discussions, youth engagement through schools and the involvement of NGOs as intermediate actors. More flexible funding of smaller amounts is also important to support local youth organisations and girls’ rights activists. This would ensure that girls in all their diversity have the opportunity to speak up on what matters to them.
3. **Recognise and amplify girls’ voices and build their capacity to participate and lead,** EWAG advocates are calling for platforms and mechanisms for girls’ participation such as a training for women youth ambassadors, a European Youth Council, or a global day for girls’ advocates. These programmes have to be made accessible to European and African youth through different online and offline communications, including in schools and in the community. They should ensure that the platforms proposed are as inclusive as possible and take into consideration the diversity of young people and girls.