



## Technical Brief

# Empowering Girls, Securing Futures: The Investment Case for Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Marriage in South-East Asia

Adolescent pregnancy and child marriage are intertwined issues. They share common drivers, such as social and gender norms that undervalue girls or stigmatize their sexual and reproductive health. An early pregnancy or marriage during adolescence carries far-reaching consequences, altering girls' life trajectories by truncating their education, increasing their risks of poor maternal health outcomes, and reducing their workforce participation and employment prospects. These issues perpetuate cycles of disadvantage, limit girls' potential, and hinder societal and economic progress.

### Key messages

- Adolescent pregnancy and child marriage are urgent challenges in South-East Asia, driven by entrenched social norms, poverty, and lack of education and reproductive health services.
- Through novel economic modeling, UNFPA and the Burnet Institute quantified the health and economic benefits from scaling up proven multisectoral interventions that prevent adolescent pregnancy and child marriage in five countries in South-East Asia,\* against medium-term and long-term time frames.
- With an additional \$5 billion to scale up proven interventions for girls by 2030, the health, social and economic impact would be profound. This investment would prevent 1.4 million unintended pregnancies and 1.1 million child marriages, generating \$13.4 billion in economic benefits by 2050.
- Maintaining these interventions through 2050, while considering the girls' lifetime benefits, could boost the benefit-cost ratio to 9.8. In other words, every \$1 invested would generate a return of nearly \$10 in the five countries in South-East Asia.
- Financing a combination of interventions will produce positive outcomes for girls and contribute toward stronger, more robust countries, underscoring that investing in girls is both the smart and right thing to do.

\* Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia and the Philippines.

# The Investment Case

Recent research by UNFPA with the Burnet Institute examined the costs and benefits of investing in proven interventions to address adolescent pregnancy and child marriage among girls ages 15–19 years old. The study focused on five South-East Asian countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The investment case estimates:

- The cost of expanding the coverage of a set of evidence-based interventions to reduce adolescent pregnancy and child marriage
- The impact of these interventions on contraceptive use, delayed sexual initiation, school enrolment or marriage rates
- The associated outcomes in averting unintended pregnancies and child marriage, as well as corresponding economic benefits.

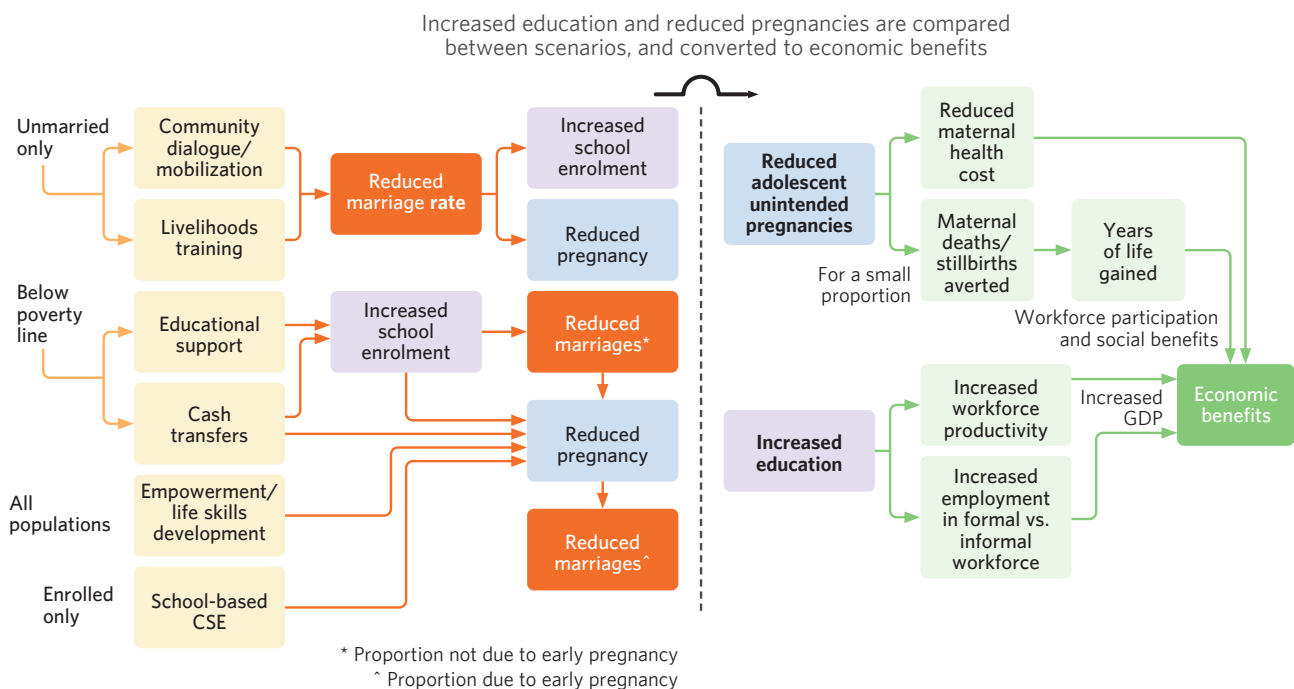
## Multisectoral interventions

This regional study includes previous work on the investment case of family planning for all women of reproductive age, but extends it by incorporating demand-side interventions that focus on adolescents. Those with sufficient evidence to inform economic modeling included:

- In-school comprehensive sexuality education<sup>1</sup>
- Conditional cash transfers<sup>2</sup>
- Educational support<sup>3</sup>
- Empowerment and life skills development<sup>4</sup>
- Livelihood training<sup>5</sup>
- Community dialogues and mobilization<sup>6</sup>

Health benefits from unintended pregnancy and child marriages averted were converted to economic benefits across the following domains: (1) direct costs averted; (2) education and workforce productivity; (3) workforce participation; (4) workforce productivity; and (5) social benefits.

## The health and economic benefits of interventions



## Results

Across all five countries, scaling up interventions as a complete package and reaching 95 per cent coverage by 2030 would collectively cost an estimated \$5 billion more than business as usual from 2024–2030. This would avert 1.4 million unintended pregnancies and 1.1 million child marriages among girls aged 15–19. This investment over this period would generate \$13.4 billion in economic benefits by 2050, with an overall benefit-cost ratio of 2.7. Maintaining interventions until 2050 and considering lifetime benefits would increase the benefit-cost ratio to 9.8 (see summary table below). In other words, every \$1 invested would generate a return of nearly \$10.

### Summary of full intervention scale-up scenario for each country

Country	Additional cost 2024–2030 (million US\$)	Number of unintended pregnancies averted 2024–2030	Number of child marriages averted 2024–2030	Economic benefits by 2050 from 2024–2030 investment (million US\$)	Benefit-cost ratio by 2050 from 2024–2030 investment	Benefit-cost ratio from maintaining investments through 2050*
Cambodia	199	106,000	87,000	455	2.3	7.1
Indonesia	2,638	738,000	574,000	7,830	3.0	10.2
Lao People's Democratic Republic	168	268,000	81,000	640	3.8	9.3
Malaysia	394	62,000	122,000	1,586	4.0	14.7
Philippines	1,547	228,000	250,000	2,890	1.9	8.3
<b>Aggregate</b>	<b>4,946</b>	<b>1,402,000</b>	<b>1,114,000</b>	<b>13,401</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>9.8</b>

\* Interventions maintained to 2050 with lifetime benefits considered.

Values were rounded before addition or division and may lead to discrepancies across rows or columns.

Securing resources to invest in these interventions, even with constrained fiscal environments, represent a strategic decision for governments. By optimizing existing budgets allocations, exploring innovative financing solutions, and strengthening collaborations with development partners and private sector actors, governments can mobilize the necessary funding and financing to implement these programmes.

## Recommendations

- **Invest in the comprehensive package of interventions for adolescent girls.** Implementation of these proven interventions should be tailored to local contexts and systems to support effective coverage.
- **Target the most vulnerable girls.** Focus on reaching girls who are most at risk, considering factors such as poverty, school attendance, and location.
- **Secure the needed resources to implement these programmes.** Governments and partners should optimize existing budget allocations, explore innovative financing solutions, and strengthen public-private sector partnerships.

## Impact

- Reducing adolescent pregnancies and child marriages allows girls to delay childbearing by choice, leading to healthier mothers and newborns, lower maternal and infant mortality and better overall well-being.
- Increased school enrollment and educational attainment among girls improve their future job prospects and earning potential, supporting economic growth.
- Empowered girls are more likely to participate in the formal workforce, contributing to increased productivity and GDP.
- Investing in girls fosters gender equality and promotes more inclusive and just societies.

## Conclusion

At a moment of fiscal constraints and difficult choices in development planning, it is hard to imagine a better investment. Governments, investors, development practitioners, civil society, and feminist groups must collaborate to support girls' agency and empowerment. Prioritizing the needs and rights of adolescent girls is crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and ensuring a better future for all. Investing in girls is not only a moral imperative, but also a strategic investment with substantial economic and social returns.

## Acknowledgements

This technical brief is based on new research to estimate the costs and benefits associated with investing in proven, multisectoral interventions that prevent adolescent pregnancy and child marriage. It covers five South-East Asian countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia and the Philippines. To access the full report: <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/publications/empowering-girls-securing-futures-investment-case-preventing-adolescent-pregnancy-and>

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## Endnotes

- 1 The comprehensive sexuality education intervention for the model focused on adolescent pregnancy prevention, involving teacher training and interactive lessons on human rights, gender norms, relationships, informed decision-making and consent, contraception, body development, peer pressure, and parenthood.
- 2 This would involve conditional or unconditional cash transfers, payment of school fees, or assets such as school supplies to girls in poverty.
- 3 Education support entailed tutoring in mathematics, English, computing and financial skills training for poor girls.
- 4 Empowerment and life skills development interventions aimed to build girls' knowledge, leadership and self-efficacy, and promote positive behaviors and peer support through safe spaces with trained female mentors. Topics include sexual and reproductive health, human rights, gender equality, gender-based violence, child marriage, and other life skills in communications, negotiation, confliction resolution, critical thinking, self management and leadership. Participants also received vocational training and courses on income generating activities.
- 5 Livelihoods training involved nurturing career aspirations among girls, exposure to income-earning activities, as well as skills building in computers, entrepreneurship, and other skills.
- 6 Community dialogues involved frequent group meetings to address social norms underlying child marriage and strategies to prevent it.



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