

An iron and folic acid supplement programme is helping protect adolescent girls from anaemia

Undernourished and overlooked: A global nutrition crisis in adolescent girls and women

This is a summary of the following report: *UNICEF (2023) Undernourished and overlooked: A global nutrition crisis in adolescent girls and women.*
<https://www.unicef.org/reports/undernourished-overlooked-nutrition-crisis>

Undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and anaemia amplify gender inequalities by lowering learning potential, wages and life opportunities for adolescent girls and women, weakening their immunity to infections and increasing their risk of life-threatening complications during pregnancy and childbirth.

This report examines the status, trends and inequities in the nutritional status of adolescent

girls and women of reproductive age (15–49 years), and the barriers they face when accessing nutritious diets, utilising essential nutrition services and benefiting from positive nutrition and care practices in low- and middle-income countries, especially in the context of the ongoing global food and nutrition crisis.

The authors analysed data from more than 190 countries, representing over 90% of adolescent girls and women globally. Data from

national surveys were used to summarise the available information on underweight, short stature, anaemia, dietary diversity and access to essential nutrition services for adolescent girls and women.

The report highlights eight key findings (Box 1), which show that the world is failing to respond with adequate policies to make the right to good nutrition a reality for all adolescent girls and women. At least two-thirds – or more than a billion – of adolescent girls and women worldwide suffer from undernutrition (underweight and/or short height) and/or micronutrient deficiencies, including anaemia. Globally, 8% of adolescent girls (49 million) and 10% of women (154 million) suffer from underweight, and almost one in three adolescent girls and women (30%, or 571 million) are living with the debilitating effects of anaemia. At a regional level, one-third of adolescent girls and women (35%, or 171 million) are shorter than 150 cm in South Asia, compared with 10% (15 million) in Eastern and Southern Africa and 7% (9 million) in West and Central Africa.

The authors outline 10 recommendations (Box 2) calling for the transformation of food, health and social protection systems for adolescent girls and women by ensuring access to nutritious, safe and affordable diets.

Box 1 Key findings from the report

1. No region is on track to meet the 2030 global targets to reduce anaemia and low birthweight, and acute malnutrition has risen by 25% since 2020 in crisis-hit countries.
2. Disadvantaged adolescent girls and women, and girls and women living in poorer regions, bear the brunt of undernutrition and anaemia. South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are home to 68% of adolescent girls and women with underweight and 60% of adolescent girls and women with anaemia.
3. Poor nutrition is passed down through the generations: about half of children under the age of two with stunting are estimated to have become stunted during pregnancy and the first six months of life.
4. The global food crisis is deepening the nutrition crisis for adolescent girls and women. Girls and women across the world have found themselves disproportionately hit by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on livelihoods, income and access to nutritious food.
5. Adolescent girls and women struggle to access nutritious diets. With rising poverty and inequities in low- and middle-income countries, there is concern that millions of girls and women will turn to cheap ultra-processed unhealthy foods that are low in essential nutrients and high in salt, sugar and unhealthy fats.
6. Harmful social and gender norms and practices block progress on the nutrition of adolescent girls and women.
7. Nutrition services and social protection programmes are failing to meet the nutrition needs of adolescent girls and women, especially in humanitarian settings. Nutrition services are not reaching adolescent girls and women with adequate coverage and equity.
8. Adolescent girls and women lack strong policy protection against undernutrition. These barriers hinder policy coherence and multi-system and multi-sector actions to improve nutrition.

Box 2 Key recommendations from the report

Nutrition governance for adolescent girls and women

- i) Build bolder leadership to mobilise institutions, leverage resources and galvanise action for adolescent girls' and women's nutrition more effectively.
- ii) Harness data and evidence to inform policy and programme decisions and strengthen accountability for adolescent girls' and women's nutrition.

Food systems and nutritious diets

- i) Improve access to affordable nutritious foods – including fruits, vegetables, eggs, fish, meat and fortified foods – for all adolescent girls and women.
- ii) Implement policies and mandatory legal measures to protect adolescent girls and women from nutrient-poor and unhealthy ultra-processed foods and beverages.

Nutrition services and social protection programmes

- i) Improve access to essential nutrition services for adolescent girls and women before and during pregnancy and while breastfeeding, including in humanitarian crises.
- ii) Expand access to social transfer programmes for adolescent girls and women, including in fragile settings and humanitarian crises.

Nutrition and care practices

- i) Use multiple communication channels (print; broadcasts; social and digital media) to reach adolescent girls, women and the general public with advice on nutrition and care practices.
- ii) Strengthen the coverage and quality of counselling to help adolescent girls, women and their family members make decisions and take action to improve nutrition.

Social and economic empowerment

- i) Implement gender-transformative policies and legal measures that strengthen the social and economic empowerment of adolescent girls and women.
- ii) Accelerate the elimination of discriminatory gender and social norms to enable adolescent girls and women to realise their rights to food and nutrition.