Evidence and Strategies for Adolescent Girls' Education Programming

A Business Brief

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This brief contributes to the evidence base for education programming to improve access to, retention of and completion of education for all adolescents, especially girls and marginalized learners, past primary school grades. The barriers and strategies are globally well known. The challenge is to contextualize and localize programming while still strengthening the education systems and services that should serve all 600 million adolescent girls (ages 10–19) worldwide.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION?

Development assistance has historically bypassed adolescent girls by grouping them with women or children, creating a "girl gap" during the pre-teen and teen years that has serious implications for social, economic, health and educational development.[1] Major international development investment efforts have focused on achieving universal primary education,[2] yet only 49 percent of countries have reached gender parity at that level. The gap widens at the secondary level, with 42 percent reaching gender parity in lower secondary and 25 percent in upper secondary education.[3]

Less than two cents of every development dollar go to programs specifically targeting adolescent girls, despite the high economic, health and social protection dividends such investment pays.[4]

SCHOOL CLOSURES HAVE DISRUPTED THE EDUCATION OF

800M GIRLS

between 6 and 19 years old.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their schooling is global. School closures have disrupted the education of 800 million girls between 6 and 19 years old, putting adolescent girls at a heightened risk of violence, child marriage, early pregnancy and child labor.[5]

While the full extent of the effects of COVID-19 on education is still being determined, it is estimated that 11 million girls will not return when schools fully reopen.[6] A telling precedent points to the impact of the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone, where early pregnancies increased by more than 60 percent.[7]

Girls with disabilities and gender and sexual minorities (GSM) face violence, discrimination and stigma that can undermine their educational outcomes.[8,9] Adolescents ages 12 to 18 with disabilities are more likely to be out of school than those without disabilities, are less likely to complete primary or secondary education, have fewer years of schooling and are less likely to possess basic literacy skills.[10] LGBTQ+ youth experience multiple forms of marginalization and adversity but can also find strength in school and family settings, which have bearing on their well-being and academic needs.[11] Many of the same strategies can be used when developing education programming for GSM and learners with disabilities, yet all must be tightly contextualized.

THE BENEFITS OF SECONDARY EDUCATION FOR GIRLS ARE WELL KNOWN:

- **Economic:** Women with secondary and tertiary education report higher earnings, labor force participation and standards of living than those with only primary education. The loss in human capital wealth incurred today because many adult women did not benefit in their youth from universal secondary education (defined as 12 years of schooling) is estimated to range between USD 15 trillion to USD 30 trillion globally.[12]

- **Health and well-being:** Secondary education increases adolescent girls' knowledge of HIV/AIDS and ability to make decisions about their health care by 20 percent. This could lead to long-term improvements in psychological well-being and decrease the likelihood of intimate partner violence.[13]

- **Social protection:** Each year of secondary education decreases the risk of child marriage and early childbearing by 6 percent. At this rate, universal secondary education would virtually eliminate child marriage and reduce early childbearing by up to 75 percent.[14]

WHAT BARRIERS PREVENT ADOLESCENT GIRLS FROM COMPLETING THEIR EDUCATION?

- **Economic barriers:** When disaggregated by income, data shows that 30 percent of adolescent girls from the lowest socio-economic groups have never attended school, and an additional 14 percent dropped out before completing primary education.[15] Poor households often lack the resources to pay for schooling and the costs associated with it, such as textbooks, uniforms, school supplies and transportation. They may choose to invest in boys' education, relying on girls to help with household chores, take care of younger siblings and eventually get married.[16]

- **School violence and bullying:** An estimated 246 million children and adolescents experience some form of physical, psychological or sexual violence, including bullying every year in school.[17] The fear or actual experience of violence has been associated with lower school attendance and learning outcomes for adolescent girls.[18] This also holds true for GSM, who are disproportionally affected by sexual and gender-based violence in school.[19]

- **Child marriage/early pregnancy:** While child marriage has been declining, 12 million girls are still married in early adolescence every year.[20] This leads to many of them leaving school, with child marriage accounting for 10 to 20 percent of dropouts at the secondary level.[21] Furthermore, child marriage has been linked to early pregnancy. In developing countries, nine out of 10 births to adolescent girls are within a marriage or union.[22] Girls who become pregnant may be forced to drop out of school or forbidden to return after they have given birth.[23]

- **Health and well-being:** Adolescent girls have reported feelings of stress, shame, embarrassment, confusion and fear based on a lack of knowledge and ability to manage their menstruation. In sub-Saharan Africa, one in 10 adolescent girls misses school during her menstrual cycle — meaning that she could be out for as much as 20 percent of the school year.[24]

- **School infrastructure:** Although there has been a rapid expansion of primary schools, distance often becomes a challenge when girls from rural areas reach the age for secondary school. A study across four regions found that 28 percent of adolescent girls "never" or "seldom" feel safe on their way to school.[25] As of 2016, nearly one-third of schools around the world also lacked basic water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities. This means that girls must leave the school premises to access these facilities, increasing their risk of sexual violence.[26]

- **Agency:** Adolescence is a time when parents, family members, religious entities and community members make decisions about what happens in girls' lives — not the girls themselves. These feelings of disempowerment can contribute to low self-esteem — which in school may be reinforced by a lack of inclusive, learner-centered teaching materials and inspiring role models. In many communities, girls have little opportunity to connect with empowering female role models.[27]

- **Conflict and crisis:** Countries experiencing high levels of conflict tend to have the largest gender gaps in education. Adolescent girls are especially vulnerable to sexual violence during conflict and forced displacement; during crises, adolescent girls are 2½ times more likely than boys to drop out of school. Violence against adolescents in crisis settings includes the risks of rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, sexual mutilation, sexual abuse and sexual torture at the hands of armed groups, government forces and law enforcement.

- **Living with a disability:** The disability disadvantage is largest at secondary education levels, and the percentage of out-of-school adolescents with sensory, physical or intellectual difficulties can range between 25 and 60 percent.[28] Children and adolescents with disabilities are three to four times more likely to experience physical and sexual violence than other children, and this vulnerability is heightened in humanitarian crises and in conflict.[29] At least one-third of all girls who are not in school live in conflict-affected and fragile settings as refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) or other vulnerable populations.[30]

WHAT PROVEN STRATEGIES IMPROVE RETENTION AND COMPLETION OF EDUCATION?

- **Conditional cash transfers (CCTs):** CCTs have been used in more than 60 countries throughout Latin America, Asia and Africa. Mexico's Progresa program has not only reduced poverty but helped to close the gender gap in secondary school attainment by making transfers to mothers and providing larger grants for girls based on preventative health care and school attendance. Women who received cash transfers in primary school completed an additional one to 1.6 grades of schooling and demonstrated improvements in such labor market outcomes as participation, work for pay and earnings.[31]

- **School support:** These interventions directly pay schools for students' tuition, uniforms and supplies on the condition of their enrollment. In sub-Saharan Africa, school support has

been found to improve retention, progression and attendance for vulnerable adolescent girls. However, there has not been a significant impact on standardized test scores, which suggests that it would be best used with interventions that address socioemotional needs and educational quality.[32]

- **Safe spaces:** Safe spaces, or those for girls only, have been effective in building confidence and capacity to stand up against gender-based violence (GBV). However, gender relations and power dynamics in society often limit adolescent girls' ability to turn that knowledge into action. For transformational change, safe spaces should be implemented alongside activities that promote livelihood development and economic empowerment. Safe spaces alone have not been proven to affect educational outcomes.[33]

- **Latrines:** Construction of school latrines has been shown to reduce dropout rates for both adolescent girls and boys. Based on a study in India, adolescent girls benefit more from sex-specific toilets than boys. Most notably, the effect on enrollment continued for three years after latrine construction, making this one of the longest-lasting educational interventions.[34]

- **Sanitary products:** The provision of sanitary pads has been found to minimize anxiety, shame and insecurity during menstruation, enabling adolescent girls to participate in the classroom more fully. When accompanied by puberty education, attendance rose by 9 percent in Ghana, or 18 days over the course of the school year. These results held true across geographic and socioeconomic status, attesting to the importance of changing cultural norms around the management of menstrual hygiene.[35]

DESPITE INVESTMENT EFFORTS FOCUSED ON ACHIEVING UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION,

ONLY **42%** of countries have reached gender parity in lower secondary and 25 percent in upper secondary education.

LESS THAN 2¢

of every development dollar go to programs specifically targeting adolescent girls.

- **Community schools:** Having a school directly in the community, such as in community-based schools, has led to improvements in girls' enrollment and academic achievement. In Afghanistan, enrollment rose by 52 percent, or 19 percent per mile, while average test scores increased by 1.28 standard deviations.[36] Besides physical distance, community schools can help bridge cultural divides; data from 16 counties in Africa showed that they had a positive effect on girls' enrollment, retention and quality of education.[37]

- **Life skills:** Life skills are important determinants of adolescent girls' academic achievement, success in the labor market and individual well-being. An evaluation of Room to Read's Girls' Education Program found that life skills education and mentoring had positive effects on decision-making, relationship-building, creative problem-solving and communication. The two-year intervention led to a 25 percent decrease in dropouts and a 4 percent increase in retention of adolescent girls in lower secondary school.[38]

- **Mentoring:** Group-based mentoring programs have been shown to improve adolescent girls' reproductive health knowledge, academic achievement, financial behavior and social networks. Successful programs use mentoring toolkits, are structured to meet at least once per week for six months or longer and incorporate multiple components, such as safe spaces and curriculum-based education, to help adolescent girls reach their full potential.[39] Mentoring from teachers plays the most significant role in academic achievement, followed by family and community members.[40]

- **Behavior change:** Social and behavior change communication has positively influenced knowledge, attitudes and social norms at the individual and community level. In Mozambique, the United Nations' program Rapariga Biz focused on adolescent girls' sexual and reproductive health by creating safe spaces, producing radio shows and engaging the community, including boys and men. Within the first year, adolescent fertility dropped to 54 percent below the national rate and there were 23,196 fewer early marriages, eliminating some of the barriers for adolescent girls to continue their education.[41]

- **Gender-responsive pedagogy:** Teacher training on gender-responsive pedagogy has led to increases in enrollment, access, retention and performance of adolescent girls. Since 2005, the Forum for African Women Educationalists has implemented its model, which targets teachers, school management and community members, in 24 countries. Its pre-service and in-service teacher training focuses on gender-sensitive approaches to classroom setup, lesson planning, student interactions, content delivery and resource development.[42] Uganda's Gender in Education Policy and the National Strategy for Girls' Education have increased the primary net enrollment ratio to 99 percent for girls by prioritizing access to quality education and the use of gender-sensitive pedagogy.[43]

- **Remedial education:** Remedial education programs have helped to address challenges around academic performance, transition to lower secondary school and community attitudes by providing adolescent girls with additional support in school. The Kenya Equity in Education Project complements remedial classes on weekends and holidays with teacher trainings, girl-friendly learning environments and community mobilizers. In the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps, 91 percent of girls who attended at least five hours of remedial classes per week improved their scores on examinations.[44]

- **Government policies:** Government policies are the foundation for the implementation of gender-equal education systems and services. Schools that have anti-bullying or inclusive policies for gender minorities are found to have positive effects on GBV and its consequences, including reduced harassment, bullying, truancy absenteeism and victimization and improvements in the school climate, wellbeing and feelings of safety.[45] However, it has been challenging for teachers and school administrators to translate policy into practice when gender inequality persists in society.[46]

- **Inclusive Education and Universal Design:** The intersection of education, disability and gender, as well as with race, class, sexual orientation and gender identity, is best addressed when applying the principles and practices of Universal Design for Learning to fulfill every learner's potential. The starting point is always contextualization. It is imperative to partner with Organizations of People with Disabilities.
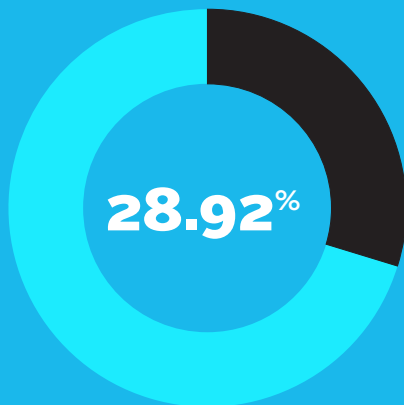
GE Next Engineers

49.41%
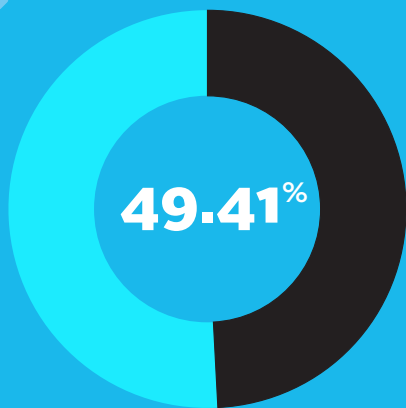
of the 1,559 unique youth to have participated in an Engineering Discovery event are girls.

(Greenville, Cincinnati and Stafford)

28.92%

of the 249 Engineering Academy applications received are from girls.
(Greenville, Cincinnati and Stafford)

20,000 School Youth

participated in Engineering Camp, building their Engineering Identity.

62,500 Youth & Parents

participated in Engineering Discovery, building awareness of engineering.

3,750 Youth (ages 14-15)

enrolled in the 3-year Engineering Academy, developing engineering habits and mindset.
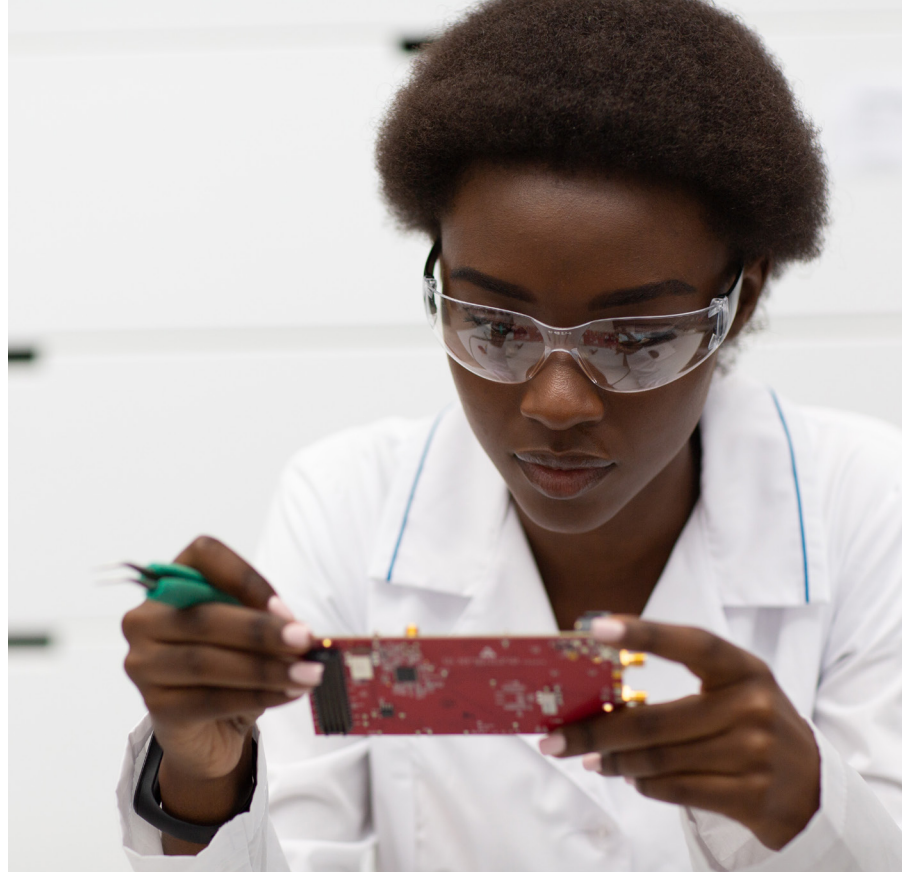
1,800 Engineering Students

pursued engineering and higher education and awarded a scholarship.

25 cities worldwide

Funded by GE Foundation

2021–2030

Next Engineers focuses on increasing the diversity of engineering professionals, particularly by reaching girls and other historically underrepresented groups. Through instruction and hands-on activities, Next Engineers introduces students ages 13 to 18 to the world of engineering, providing them with educational and career opportunities they may not otherwise experience.[47]

KEY INITIATIVES:

- **Engineering Discovery**, which builds engineering awareness for students ages 13 to 14 through exploratory activities and demonstrations.

- **Engineering Camp,** a week-long summer camp that immerses students ages 14 to 15 in the engineering process as they work with professional engineers to solve real-world design challenges.

- **Engineering Academy,** a three-year college preparatory program in which students ages 15 to 18 complete a series of immersive design challenges, career coaching and college-readiness workshops. Graduates of the academy who are accepted into a university engineering program will earn scholarship support from Next Engineers.[48]

Passerelles

4,800 **School Teachers & Principals**

have received training in preventing gender-based violence in schools.

OVER **1,000** **Young Men & Women**

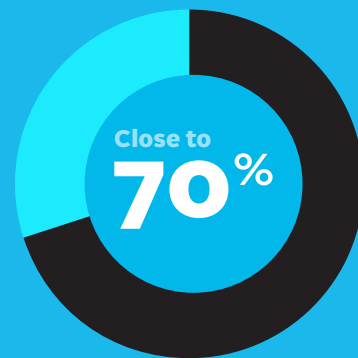and over **400 youth groups** have engaged in preventing GBV in schools.

369 **School Government & Community Members**

have received training in preventing GBV in schools.

349 **School Principals**

have been trained in helping adolescents, especially young women, transition from elementary to lower secondary schools.

Which resulted in…

Close to 70%

of male and female students in Passerelles schools who now feel safer in their learning environment.

80 **Student Parliaments**

that led games and practical social and emotional learning exercises in their classes to establish a positive and friendly climate and develop skills such as respect for others, mutual aid, solidarity, self-confidence and problem-solving.

Close to **500 classrooms**

that promote a safe, inclusive and violence-free environment in their respective schools.

Senegal

Funded by USAID

2018–2023

Passerelles works to improve access to high-quality, relevant education for children and youth in post-conflict regions. The project employs an evidence-based approach that builds on best practices in conflict-sensitive and inclusive education, gender equality and positive youth development.[49]

KEY INITIATIVES:

- **Strengthening and extending complementary basic education services** to ensure flexible pathways into the formal education system and professional or vocational training.

- **Improving the relevance, quality and inclusiveness** of formal education services, with a special focus on gender and the prevention of gender-based violence as well as support for learners with disabilities.

- **Supporting children, particularly girls,** in successfully making the transition from primary to secondary school by removing social, economic and institutional barriers.

- **Empowering families and communities** to recognize their voice in and ownership of local education services.[50]

ACCELERE!

Accelerating Equitable Access to School, Reading, Student Retention and Accountability

1,774

public and private schools where **localized equity and gender-based violence monitoring committees** were put in place; local and confidential discussions between GBV monitors and learners led to building trust; and gender-responsive materials were put into use.

Over **200**

cases of GBV were reported as a result of a **referral system for victims and perpetrators of violence** that was put in place at the provincial level, thus strengthening the systemic adoption of GBV prevention in school; sanctions were taken against perpetrators.

Students reported new awareness of what GBV is, **felt safer in school, were more equipped to identify GBV** and report on aggressions; female learners reported having more self-confidence in general.[51]

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Funded by USAID, DFID/ UKAID

2015–2020

This project was one of four activities under the ACCELERE! education reform program, which worked in more than 25 sub-provinces to support DRC's national education strategy. FHI 360 was part of the consortium that improved reading outcomes by developing instructional materials, enhancing teacher pedagogy, creating safe learning spaces and working with the government to strengthen accountability systems and education policies.[52] ACCELERE! anchored gender-responsive strategies that raise awareness of school-based violence, provide mitigation and response to GBV and empower female adolescent learners.[53]
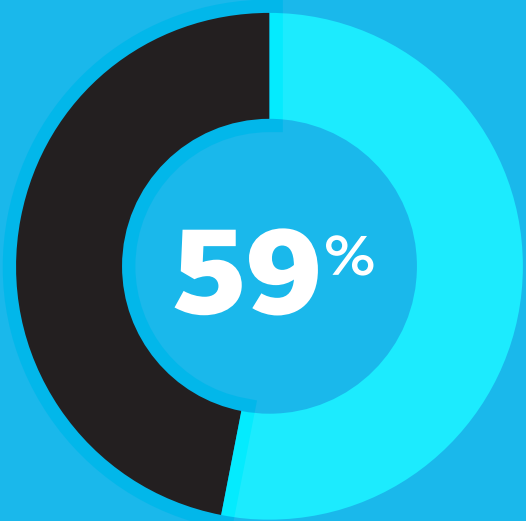
DREAMS

Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored and Safe
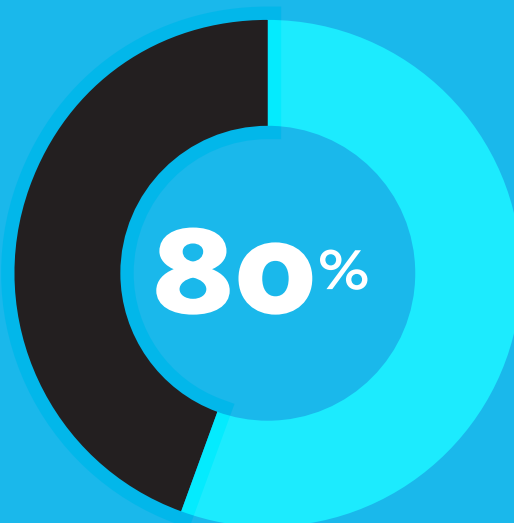
88%
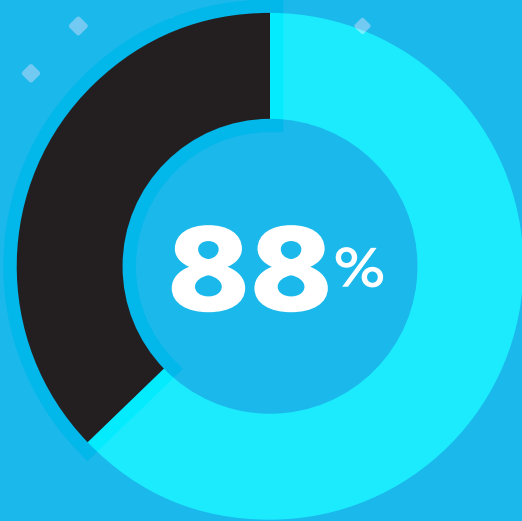
of girls knew to whom they should report violence that they experience or witness.

+9 percentage points from baseline

59%

of girls in schools with mentoring had high HIV knowledge.

+10 percentage points from baseline

80%

of girls in schools with mentoring reported high levels of self-efficacy.

+4 percentage points from baseline[54]

Malawi

Funded by DREAMS Innovation Challenge

2016–2018

The DREAMS: Malawi Communities Investing in Education for Child Health and Safety project focused on keeping girls in secondary school and addressed a range of factors that contributed to HIV infection among girls and young women. FHI 360's innovative approach involved integrated, community-led efforts designed to ensure that education, health and economic drivers were simultaneously addressed and strengthened. Over time, this fostered increased participation in secondary school and reduced incidence of HIV in adolescent girls and boys.[55]

> *I did not know that in Malawi, there are women who hold high-ranking positions .. because in our community, all leaders, including teachers, are men. After interacting with professional women at [the] conference, I realize that I have potential like any other person. .. I have learned that I, too, can rise above the social barriers to become who I want to be if I stay focused on my education"*
>
> *— Isabel, 17[56]*
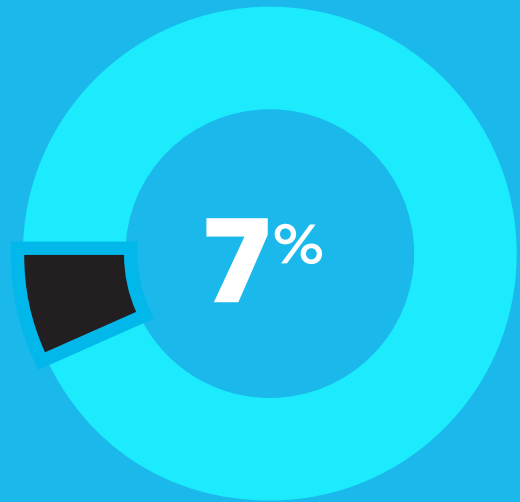
PPFuturo-MZ

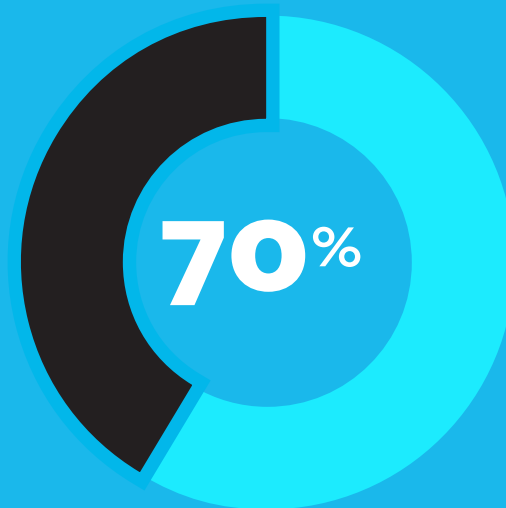## Programa Para o Futuro-Mozambique

67%
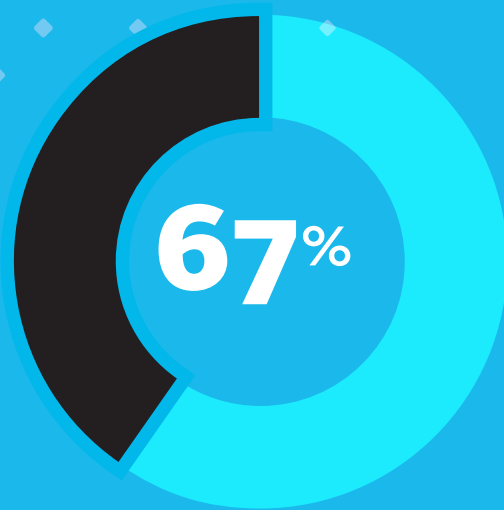
of female PPF graduates aged 18–26 completed secondary school.

+63.8 percentage points from provincial completion rate

7%

of PPF youth had a child before the age of 18.

-30 percentage points from provincial average

70%

of PPF youth were employed in the formal or informal sectors within at least one year of graduation.

+10 percentage points from national employment rate[57]

Mozambique

Funded by USAID

2009–2018

PPFuturo-MZ enabled older orphans and at-risk children to transform their lives and secure economic prosperity. FHI 360 used a project-based learning approach to build employability, literacy, numeracy, decision-making and problem-solving skills that are essential for success in the workplace. Through the project, young people also developed voice and agency and knowledge about HIV/AIDS and gender.[58]

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