



# 10 MILLION FUTURES

## SUMMARY

An urgent call to action to protect the futures  
of young women and girls.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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thewaterloofoundation\*

## SECTION 1:

# FORWARD

**“If we get help, many of us would go back to school, and we can achieve our dreams and become future leaders.”**

*– 17-year-old schoolgirl*

The young women and girls whom Irise supports are painfully aware of what is at stake. They recognise that they are at crossroads in their journeys to achieve their dreams and ambitions for the future, and they know that they need the global community to support and stand with them if they are to succeed. Everyone who has invested in young women and girls over the last decade now faces a moment of reckoning. There has been immense progress since the Beijing Declaration; however, young women and girls have been hit hardest by COVID-19, especially schoolgirls living in rural areas, slum settings, and those with disabilities.

Young women and girls are calling for action to protect their futures. We cannot let this crisis undo a decade of progress towards gender equality. We must deliver on the promises that have inspired a whole generation of girls.

Critically, young women and girls also have a potentially transformative role to play in a rapid and resilient recovery from this global crisis. It is not just their futures at risk – urgent action to protect them now will enable them to become key players in supporting their families and communities to recover. If we abandon them to face school dropout and child marriage, we set the scene for a much longer and harder road to a prosperous and sustainable world.

If we act for young women and girls now, together, we can turn things around, and in doing so, we can catalyse a brighter future for everyone.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Many girls’ [futures] are getting spoilt because of the situation at hand, and if things were good, many would study. And now things are not good, many have been forced into early marriages, pregnancies. If we get help, many of us would go back to school, and we can achieve our dreams and become future leaders.”

– Rachael, 17-year-old schoolgirl

Progress towards gender equality over the last decade has been remarkable. More girls than ever before have been in school and are on track to realise their full potential, transform their communities, and build a better society for everyone. Since the pandemic began, a growing body of research, stories, and experiences have highlighted that this progress is in jeopardy. Irise’s review of this evidence, including primary research in Uganda with government and third-sector stakeholders who have supported thousands of girls over the last 12 months and in-depth case studies with 20 Ugandan girls and the people who support them, shines a spotlight on the impact of the global pandemic on the lives and futures of adolescent girls in low-income contexts. Our review reveals that their once-bright futures are under threat — along with a decade of progress towards realising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for girls.

We already know from previous pandemics that the disease itself may not discriminate, but existing inequalities and harmful social norms do. Women and girls face a disproportionate burden of negative impacts that threaten their futures for many years to come. And yet, these women and girls are often critical in lifting families and communities out of poverty. When girls stay in school and thrive, we know they marry later, earn more, and help their whole society to be healthier and more prosperous. The negative impacts they are experiencing now, if unaddressed, will slow down and hamper long-term recovery from this global crisis.

**The potential of young women to transform the long-term prosperity of their communities and societies is at significant risk of being lost if urgent action is not taken to protect them and their futures:**

- Young women’s ability to generate enough income to meet their own needs and support their families has been severely compromised by the economic shock created by the pandemic.
- In Uganda, young women feel they must recover their financial independence and generate sustainable income to participate in household and community decision-making, leaving them side-lined and desperate.
- Many girls are at risk of school dropout and early marriage because of school closures and the economic pressures created by the pandemic. They believe leaving school will mark the end of their dreams and hopes for the future.

“I am worried that I might not go back to school and I may end up marrying at an early age [...] As a girl, I know education is the key to success, but I am just here helpless [...] I don’t want to become a young mother and the suffering continues.”

– 15-year-old schoolgirl

- Girls face increased risk of emotional, physical, and sexual harm and violence. Most of the threats to the safety of girls originate from no longer being in the protective environment that schools offer.
  - In Uganda, girls who used to attend boarding schools must now walk long distances unaccompanied to benefit from limited school reopening, exposing them to sexual harassment.
  - An increase in and exposure to domestic violence is widely reported.
  - Unplanned pregnancies have increased, as have the number of girls being forced into child marriage due to resource constraints.

“Many girls are going to get married off, just like my sister who married at 12 years during pandemic.”

– 17-year-old schoolgirl

- Young women's ability to access adequate sexual and reproductive health services has been compromised. Most cannot afford the cost of travelling to access these services. The few that have been able to have been met with a shortage of supplies, such as condoms and birth control pills.
- The pandemic has worsened the challenges facing young women and girls when they are menstruating.
  - Access to preferred menstrual materials has been compromised due to the decline in household incomes and an increase in the price of disposable menstrual pads.
  - Young women and girls have resorted to using materials they would otherwise not use to manage their menstrual fluid, such as old clothes and rags.
  - The availability of soap and water to wash these materials has decreased due to increased demand elsewhere to limit the spread of the coronavirus.
  - Young women and girls who have lost their income feel distressed, anxious, and frustrated that they are forced to rely on men to provide what they need.
- Girls are taking on a high proportion of household tasks compared to boys and are feeling overwhelmed with the expectations being placed on them at home to generate income.

- There is evidence of a major mental health crisis among young women and girls who feel lonely, abandoned, and that they are losing their hope for a better future.

*“Whenever, I think of what my father tells me about getting a man, I sit there and feel pain deeply in my heart. With no hope and lack of food to eat, I feel hopeless. I thought of becoming a nurse, and now I do not have hopes of going back to school.”*

*– 17-year-old schoolgirl*

UNESCO have estimated that over 10 million girls may not return to school this year as a result of these disruptions: 10 million futures at risk.

*“I am asking for help. Whoever has [...] heard my voice can come in and help me put right my future, and I go back to school because I want my dream of becoming a nurse to come true. The truth is we are many in this situation.”*

*– 17-year-old schoolgirl*

## What Must Be Done: Priorities for Supporting Young Women and Girls

Young women and girls know that if they stay in education, they will go on to thrive and help their families and communities recover from this crisis.

The following priorities are key:

- **Ongoing investment in young women and girls.** The global community must honour its commitments to women and girls and continue to invest in their futures. Private and public funding bodies who have been supporting young women and girls in low-income contexts must make them a priority.
- **Immediate action from everyone, including local and national governments and civil society organisations, to support adolescent girls and young women, protecting both them and the progress of the last decade.** Ugandan girls need access to education and urgent, coordinated safeguarding.
- **Support for women and girls to recover from the trauma they have experienced during the pandemic.** Policymakers, civil society organisations, and schools need to adapt and innovate to keep girls in school and deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for girls.

- **Refocus efforts by all stakeholders committed to realising gender equality on working together to rebuild a world where progress for girls is more resilient.** Ugandan women and girls' economic empowerment is critical to enabling their participation in decision-making spaces.
- **More studies and data collection by researchers, learning-focused institutions, and all NGOs working directly with young women and girls to quantify the scale of the challenges explored in this report and inform urgent action to address them.**

If we act now, together, we can protect a decade of investment in the lives of girls and stimulate a strong recovery that builds a more resilient future for them, their communities, and the world.





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