Why Focus on Adolescent Girls?

Adolescence (10-19 years of age) is a pivotal period in determining a child's future. So when adolescent girls are marginalized, denied education and subject to child marriage, they are denied bright futures.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), approximately 60 percent of girls in developing countries complete primary school and just 30 percent enrol in secondary school. In many countries where the World Food Programme works, adolescence marks a time when a girl can begin being considered for marriage - according to UNFPA, one in three girls in developing countries is married before the age of 18 and one in nine before the age of 15. Each year 7.3 million girls below the age of 18 give birth, and complications related to pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among adolescent girls aged between 15 and 19.

The education, health and social needs of adolescent girls are increasingly recognised as an area where more needs to be done. The 2013 Lancet Maternal and Child Nutrition Series has highlighted the nutrition opportunities. Interventions tailored to adolescent girls should improve access to education, ensure good nutrition, delay marriage and prevent early pregnancies so that these girls can reach their full potential.

Adolescent Girls and Malnutrition

Nutrition interventions targeting adolescent girls are important in several ways. First, as a vulnerable group, adolescent girls are at risk of malnutrition, particularly micronutrient deficiencies. Addressing their nutrient needs supports their health and well-being. Second, ensuring an adolescent girl is getting the nutrients she needs means that if she becomes pregnant, she and her child are likely to be healthier. That's why WFP is placing a high priority on the nutrition of adolescent girls.
Supporting Girls to Stay in School

School meals help children concentrate in class and provide an incentive to stay in school. Providing girls with a take-home ration to share with their family is an added reason for parents to keep sending their daughters to school at an age when they may be pulled out to help at home. Adolescent girls who stay in school have an opportunity to improve their education and a better chance of delaying the age at which they get married and become pregnant. According to UNICEF, if all girls in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia had secondary education, child marriage would fall by two-thirds. An extra year of primary school also boosts girls’ eventual wages by 10 to 20 percent, while an extra year of secondary school increases wages by 15 to 25 percent. So a meal provided at school or a take-home ration can improve an adolescent girl’s future.

Working Together

WFP, UNICEF and UNFPA are partnering to invest in adolescent girls. UNFPA’s Action for Adolescent Girls is an initiative that aims to protect the rights of adolescent girls and empower the most marginalized, in particular by delaying marriage and childbearing. The three agencies will work together as part of this initiative to improve the reach of comprehensive life skills and education services for out-of-school adolescent girls including integration of nutrition and reproductive health services. At the same time, WFP’s school feeding platform will also be used to deliver sexual and reproductive health education in schools where WFP delivers school meals. Nutrition-specific interventions include the prevention and treatment of micronutrient deficiencies of adolescent girls. By combining the complementary strengths of the three agencies, this partnership will address the health and nutrition needs of vulnerable adolescent girls and ultimately contribute to broader goals of maternal, newborn and child health and prevention of stunting.