



## Converging Risks: Demographic Trends, Gender Inequity, and Security Challenges in the Sahel

### BACKGROUND

Security conditions in the Sahel are rapidly deteriorating. Since 2016, the region has witnessed a [16-fold increase in terrorist attacks](#). In Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, [10.5 million people are facing starvation](#), and with climate-related disasters increasing and intensifying in the region, food insecurity is projected to rise. Against this backdrop, in a region where governments are already struggling to provide access to basic services, high fertility rates have the region's population on track to more than [double](#) over the next 30 years. These pressures have transformed the central Sahel into the epicenter of a [forced displacement crisis](#), with dire long-term and global humanitarian consequences that reverberate well beyond the region's borders.

Birth rates are [three to four times](#) higher in the Sahel than in other parts of the world, leading to a “youth bulge,” a term used when a state's population includes a disproportionately large cohort of young adults, typically between the ages of 15 and 29 years old. This demographic structure has historically been correlated with higher rates of civil conflict, where there are also high rates of unemployment, poverty, and poor education, sparking discontent and a search for alternative options, like non-state armed groups.

Furthermore, staggering [gender inequality](#) and [high rates of adolescent childbearing](#) have resulted in high levels of [maternal mortality](#) and gender-based violence. Given current fertility rates, none of the Sahelian countries are projected to enter the “[demographic window](#)”—a period of time when a country's age structure, paired with the right policies, can enable more favorable economic and social conditions—between now and 2045. Yet while the challenges facing Sahelian countries are mutually reinforcing, so are their solutions.



### OPENING THE DEMOGRAPHIC WINDOW

Investments in girls' education and voluntary family planning are proven investments in enabling a “demographic window” and contributing to regional stability. Together, [investments in girls' education and voluntary family planning](#) reinforce each other and generate multiple social, economic, and security benefits that in turn address the root causes of fragility and insecurity. Funding for voluntary family planning and girls' education rank among the most impactful forms of investment: [every \\$1 dollar spent yields a \\$120 increase](#) in economic output. In comparison, benefits per dollar spent on peacekeeping troops, reduction of child malnutrition, and immunization expansion are far lower—\$5, \$45, and \$60, respectively. Yet financing for family planning falls well short of what is needed. Currently, the family planning sector is only 26 percent funded. Estimates show that another \$107 million/year is required to fulfill the unmet need for family planning in the Sahel.

Keeping girls in school is crucial to addressing the converging crises in the Sahel. However, there





continues to be societal opposition to girls' education in the Sahel region. This resistance adds fuel to the worsening of conditions such as food insecurity, unemployment, displacement, gender-based violence and discrimination, and ultimately weakens governance. One organization working at the core of these challenges is [The Centre for Girls' Education](#) in Northern Nigeria, which focuses on creating a safe educational space to equip girls with the skills needed to work outside the home. It is estimated that these types of interventions can [delay the age of marriage by 2.5 years](#) for girls after leaving school, an important avenue for empowering girls and advancing women's rights across the Sahel region. Evidence shows that increasing efforts to boost girls' education, curb child marriage, and ensure access to voluntary family planning not only advances the human rights of women and girls, but also [helps to reduce insecurity and strengthen governance](#)—benefiting society as a whole.



## LEVERAGING INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENT IN THE SAHEL

The United States [can build on its prior investments](#) in the region, but it also has the opportunity to take a leadership role in encouraging other members of the international community to contribute. Between 2014 and 2020, the United States disbursed approximately \$809 million in peace and security assistance to the G5 Sahel nations.<sup>1</sup> In comparison, U.S. contributions to family planning in the same time period were approximately \$65 million.<sup>2</sup> While the United States finances the lion's share of global family planning, investments in this area have stagnated over the past decade. For instance, grants through USAID tend to make large awards to international NGOs, which are important, but less effective without funding for local NGOs who best know how to lay the groundwork for societal change. Finally, the impact of COVID-19 and Russia's war in Ukraine on these efforts needs to be acknowledged and addressed. As the youngest continent in the world, Africa's population was able to weather the pandemic better from a health perspective, but the interruptions to the global supply chain and food supplies have had an outsized impact, with cascading impacts on humanitarian and development spending. To interrupt worsening cycles of poverty and instability, the international community must partner with Sahelian communities and governments to increase investments in women and girls.

<sup>1</sup> Peace and Security dataset from US Foreign Assistance Explorer. Includes flows for Transnational Crime, CounterTerrorism, Stabilization Operations and Security Sector Reform, Counter-Narcotics, Peace and Security - General (includes peacekeeping missions), Conflict Mitigation and Reconciliation, and Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).

<sup>2</sup> Health dataset from US Foreign Assistance Explorer. Includes Family Planning and Reproductive Health sectors.



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To read more on this topic see the Wilson Center's policy brief, [Converging Risks: Demographic Trends, Gender Inequity, and Security Challenges in the Sahel](#)