



The Condition of the Girl Child worldwide 2025

14th Edition

By Terre des Hommes Italy



On the occasion of the **International Day of the Girl Child**, introduced by the **UN** in 2012 and celebrated yearly on October 11th, **Terre des Hommes** launches again the “**Indifesa**” Campaign. This initiative aims at safeguarding education, health, protection from violence, discrimination and abuse for girls worldwide.

With this important **campaign to raise awareness**, in the last 14 years Terre des Hommes has placed the protection of girls’ rights worldwide at the core of its interventions. It commits itself to defend their right to life, freedom, education, equality, and protection. It will achieve this starting from concrete field interventions, leading to tangible results in breaking the poverty cycle and offering better opportunities to thousands of girls and young women globally. For further information: www.indifesa.org

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Since 1960, Terre des Hommes is on the front line to protect children worldwide from violence, abuse and exploitation and to ensure every child with schooling, informal education, medical assistance and food. Terre des Hommes is currently present in 68 countries with 983 projects in favour of children. Terre des Hommes Foundation Italy is a member of the Terre des Hommes International Federation; it works in partnership with EU DG ECHO and is accredited by the European Union, the UN, USAID and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Cooperation and Development Agency.

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Cover photo: Abed Zagout

Introduction

She arrived at the hospital too late. Her wounds continued to bleed on the way there and doctors at the Bundung Maternal and Child Hospital in Banjul, Gambia, couldn't save her. She was only 1 month old. It is perhaps the most striking example of a plague that even today still affects girls: in 2024 alone, 44,320 died due to Female Genital Mutilation.

But her story is just one of the many facets of a prism through which we attempt to interpret data in the 2025 edition of the **indifesa** Dossier. This facet is one that reflects dull colours: the goals that we, as a Community, have failed to achieve, the virtuous cycles that we have cut short, the lives that we have failed to save. Female genital mutilation still affects too many victims. Schooling is under attack and, after years of progress, improvements show signs of slowing down or regressing, and not only in countries like Afghanistan. **Today 600 million women live in countries at war, an increase of 50% since 2017.**

On sexual and reproductive health, the whirlwind of Donald Trump's cuts to international funding is causing damage, the dramatic consequences of which will unfold in the coming years. The mental health of our youth, and especially of girls, has never seemed so fragile as it does today. Violence against girls, and against children and women more broadly, appears to be spreading like an epidemic and even **crimes against minors in Italy surpass 7,000 cases per year**, confirming that girls remain the majority of victims.

The prism, however, also reflects the iridescence of change: the trend of sex-selective abortions has been significantly reversed thanks to reforms, regulatory measures, awareness campaigns and economic incentives for families. **The share of girls completing their education is rising**, and in many economies the percentage of young people who are neither studying nor working is declining, despite persistent gender gaps, as in Italy. Also child marriages are decreasing, proof that laws, social protection and active community involvement can break ancient chains.

Institutions and civil society have joined forces, integrated programmes are enabling girls to stay in school and to receive sexual health education courses that reduce sex-selective abortions and early pregnancies, as shown by our PReaCH project in Zimbabwe.

This, the 14th edition of this Dossier, presents data for reflection as well as the tools and best practices for taking action. While progress shows that the right strategies work, setbacks remind us that we cannot take our collective foot off the pedal and must always maintain focus on the direction of change we want to pursue.

We need to continuously invest in education and health, and to put in place protection systems in the most fragile contexts, economic measures that reduce family poverty and public policies for equality.

Above all, as our *She Leads* project attests, **we must give youth leadership a platform and a voice**: when girls and boys participate in decision making, the results are more impactful and long-lasting.

We dedicate these pages to them, and to those who work alongside them: teachers, activists, local administrators, institutional representatives, social network and media operators.

It is together that we must build the future – and now.

Chapter I

Selective abortions: an encouraging trend reversal in favour of girls



Photo: Giulio Di Sturco

Highlights

- It is estimated that **23.1 million fewer girls** were born between 1970 and 2017 due to selective abortions.
- Since 2000, something has been changing: we have gone **from 1.7 million more male births than the normal sex ratio to 200,000.**
- South Korea is one of the countries representing this trend reversal: in 1990 it recorded 115.7 males for every 100 female babies. In 2022, there were 105 males for every 100 females. The percentage of women who felt 'obliged' to have a son has plummeted from 48% to 6%: half, today, would like a girl.

“Phew, it’s a girl!” A sigh of relief imprinted on a pink balloon crowned with stars is the cover image of the British weekly *The Economist* of 5 June 2025. “Without great fanfare, something remarkable has happened. **The noxious practice of aborting girls simply for being girls has become dramatically less common**”, reads the article, which reports an encouraging reversal of a chilling phenomenon: that of selective abortions.

¹ “The stunning decline of the preference for having boys”, *The Economist*, 2025 - <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2025/06/05/the-stunning-decline-of-the-preference-for-having-boys>

The natural sex ratio at birth is 105 males for every 100 females. But in some countries where the preference for males is particularly deep-rooted and infanticide of female babies used to occur, the cruel practice of aborting female foetuses began in the 1980s.

According to a study² published in 2019, 23.1 million fewer girls were born between 1970 and 2017. The majority of these fewer births were in India (10.6 million) and China (11.9 million), in the latter partly as a result of the 'one-child policy' introduced in 1979 to control population growth and then officially abolished in 2015, when the Beijing government allowed couples to have two children.

"In 2000, the worst year", writes *The Economist*³, "there were about 1.7 million more male births than there should have been. In 2015 there was a decrease, but the number of excess male births was still over one million". The magazine estimates that the number will drop to around 200,000 more male births this year.

Selective abortions have caused a dangerous imbalance in the demographic balance of some countries: in China, for example, it reached a staggering 117.8 males per 100 females in 2006, while in India the highest point was recorded in 2010, with 109.6 males per 100 females. South Korea, in 1990, registered 115.7 male babies for every 100 female babies.

And it was Seoul's government that was the first to reverse the trend: by 2022, the sex ratio at birth had returned to normal levels, 105 males for every 100 females⁴. The Economist also points to an improvement in the situation in China, where the imbalance has been decreasing for some years and stood at 109.8 in 2024, and in India, with a sex ratio of 106.8⁵.

The trend noted by *The Economist* is definitely positive, but selective abortions are still a phenomenon far from being completely eradicated. In India, for example, there are states that not only show no improvement, but even see an increase in the number of male babies: the state of Haryana recorded 910 girls per 1,000 boys born in 2024: "The lowest birth ratio in eight years, down six points by 2023," reads a local newspaper⁶.

Equally worrying is the situation in Bihar (where 891 girls per thousand boys were born in 2022), Maharashtra (906 per thousand) and Gujarat (908 per thousand)⁷.

On the other hand, there are countries (and they are mainly the richer ones) where families prefer to have daughters than sons. In South Korea, for example, the percentage of women who felt 'obliged' to have a son has plummeted from 48% to 6%: half, today, would like a girl. A 2002 *National Fertility Survey* of Japan found that 75% of couples intending to have only one child wanted a girl: in 1982, the figure was 48%. Similar is the trend in Scandinavia, where couples with two sons tend to have a third son more often than those with two daughters, a sign of a pro-female orientation, as in the Czech Republic, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal.

Further confirmation comes from medically assisted procreation clinics in countries where it is possible to select the sex of the unborn child. Normally in fertility treatments, this choice is only allowed for medical reasons (e.g. if one is a carrier of a disease that affects a certain sex).

² "Systematic assessment of the sex ratio at birth for all countries and estimation of national imbalances and regional reference levels", PNAS, 2019 - <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6511063/>

³ "More and more parents around the world prefer girls to boys", *The Economist*, 2025 -

<https://www.economist.com/briefing/2025/06/05/more-and-more-parents-around-the-world-prefer-girls-to-boys>

⁴ "South Korea's gender imbalance is bad news for men", *The Conversation*, 2024 - <https://theconversation.com/south-koreas-gender-imbalance-is-bad-news-for-men-outnumbering-women-many-face-bleak-marriage-prospects-217661>

⁵ "The stunning decline of the preference for having boys", *The Economist*, 2025

⁶ "Alarming drop: Haryana's sex ratio at birth hits 8-year low of 910 in 2024", *Business Standard*, 2025 - https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/haryana-sex-ratio-birth-2024-lowest-eight-years-decline-125010400210_1.html

⁷ <https://www.indiatoday.in/diu/story/india-population-census-fertility-rate-birth-rate-sex-ratio-2738475-2025-06-10>

However, there are countries such as the United States, Mexico and Cyprus where selection is also permitted for reasons that are not strictly medical. According to *The Economist*⁸ fertility treatment clinics in New York are experiencing a growing demand for sex selection for girls, including from wealthy families from countries where the practice is banned, such as Britain or Europe.

In the United States and South Korea, a similar trend is observed among couples choosing to adopt.

GOOD TO KNOW!

- In China, the abolition of the one-child policy, which prohibited women from having more than one child from 1979 to 2013, was instrumental in bringing about change.
- In India, a 1994 law prohibits sex selection before birth. For this rule to produce real effects, the awareness-raising work carried out by civil society, with the support of the judiciary, health and law enforcement agencies, which promoted a cultural change in favour of girls, was crucial.

⁸ "More and more parents around the world prefer girls to boys", *The Economist*, 2025 - <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2025/06/05/more-and-more-parents-around-the-world-prefer-girls-to-boys>

Chapter 2

Female genital mutilations: the growth in the number of victims of “cutting” does not stop



Photo: James Pursey

Highlights

- More than 230 million girls have undergone some form of genital mutilation, 15% more than estimated eight years ago.
- Every year, more than **four million girls** are still forced to undergo this practice. Due to population growth in those countries in which this practice is widespread, this number could rise to 4.6 million in 2030.
- In some countries, the “medicalisation” of female genital mutilation has become widespread. However, even if the interventions are performed within clinics by healthcare professionals, the risks and problems involved remain the same.
- Although the practice of FGM is primarily concentrated in Africa and some Middle Eastern countries, the phenomenon is also widespread in other parts of the world, particularly in **South-East Asia**.

In mid-August, the international press reported a case of death due to female genital mutilation (FGM) that caused quite a stir, partly because of the age of the victim: just one month old. The newborn girl had undergone “cutting” in Wellingara, Gambia, but soon suffered a haemorrhage. Three women have been charged with her death, one of whom faces life imprisonment for performing the mutilation, under the law enacted in 2015.

Although FGM is illegal in the country, it remains a widespread phenomenon, with victims becoming increasingly younger. ‘Parents believe that if they subject their daughters to excision when they are still infants, the healing process is faster, but also that, because of the law, if the practice is performed at an early age, it is much easier to hide,’ Fatou Baldeh, founder of the NGO *Women In Leadership and Liberation*, told the BBC⁹. According to a study on FGM by UNICEF¹⁰ this practice, universally recognised as a serious violation of human rights, is becoming increasingly widespread.

There are currently **more than 230 million** women and girls in the world who live with the painful consequences of FGM, a figure that is up by 15% compared to estimates eight years ago. The increase is linked both to the increase in the population of communities practising 'cutting', and to a greater availability of data. Most of the victims - some 114 million girls and women - live in Africa, 80 million live in Asia, 6 million in Middle Eastern countries, another 1-2 million in the global diaspora.

Although the Fifth Sustainable Development Goal commits the international community to eliminating FGM by 2030, and many efforts have been made in that direction, there remain more than four million girls and young women each year who are forced to undergo this painful procedure which is dangerous to their physical and psychological health. Not only that: due to population growth in the countries where it is widespread, the number of girls and young women who will be cut could rise to 4.6 million by 2030¹¹.

So-called 'cutting' is a procedure that in most cases is performed by people —often elderly women — who have no medical expertise, in unsuitable surroundings, using scissors or razor blades, without the aid of anaesthetics or painkillers. All this exponentially increases the **risk of infection or haemorrhage**, which can cause serious, even long-term health problems for the girl who ends up under the hands of the traditional *exciseurs*.

Very often this 'cutting' can lead to death. According to a study by the University of Birmingham, which looked at 15 African nations with an excision tradition, this practice causes at least 44,000 deaths each year¹². A fact that — write the authors of the study — '*makes FGM one of the most serious public health challenges in these countries. They cause more deaths than HIV/AIDS, measles, meningitis, and many other well-known causes of death for young women and girls*'¹³. However, the numbers are certainly underestimated, as the study could not take into account countries such as Somalia and Somaliland for which there is no data and where the percentage of women who undergo “cutting” is 99%¹⁴.

The medicalisation of this practice is increasing

Genital mutilations are performed on girls when they are still very young (often in their first three years of life) or when they enter adolescence, representing a sort of rite of passage in view of marriage. In most

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c6200g5d4jlo>

¹⁰ <https://data.unicef.org/resources/female-genital-mutilation-a-global-concern-2024/>

¹¹ ‘*The Time is Now: End Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, An Urgent Need for Global Response 2025*’, Equality Now, 2025, <https://equalitynow.org/resource/the-time-is-now-end-female-genital-mutilation-cutting-an-urgent-need-for-global-response-2025-update/>

¹² ‘*Estimating excess mortality due to female genital mutilation*’, National Library of Medicine, 2024 - <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10432559/>

¹³ ‘*Female genital mutilation is a leading cause of death for girls where it is practised - new study*’, *The Conversation*, 2025 - <https://theconversation.com/female-genital-mutilation-is-a-leading-cause-of-death-for-girls-where-its-practised-new-study-249171>

¹⁴ <https://www.fgmcri.org/country/somalia/>

countries, the “cutting” is entrusted to elderly women and men who belong to the communities and perpetuate this very dangerous practice, passing it down from generation to generation. However, in some countries, a different and equally worrying method has gained ground over the years: the 'medicalisation' of female genital mutilation. The operations in these cases are carried out in public or private clinics, by doctors or other compliant health workers. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that the phenomenon is particularly widespread in Egypt (where 31% of FGM is already performed by health workers), Sudan (41%) and Eritrea (83%)¹⁵.

Organisations involved in the fight against genital mutilation and the World Health Organisation (WHO) express concern about the spread of this practice: the most recent estimates, in fact, speak of some 52 million women and girls who have been mutilated by a health professional¹⁶.

While interventions carried out by professionals in more suitable and hygienic environments can reduce (but not entirely avoid) serious health complications or the death of victims, it is important to reiterate that genital mutilation is an unnecessary and health-damaging intervention that can cause pain and complications during sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and childbirth.

Regardless of who performs them, writes the WHO, FGM causes harm, and some studies even suggest that these “interventions” may turn out to be even more dangerous if performed by health workers as they may cause deeper cuts and severe¹⁷.

Genital mutilation in Asia and Europe

Although the practice of female genital mutilation is mainly concentrated in Africa and some Middle Eastern countries, this phenomenon is also widespread in other parts of the world, particularly in South-East Asia. In fact, according to UNFPA, 35% of girls and women who survived “cutting” live here¹⁸.

In Indonesia, it is estimated that half of all women between the ages of 15 and 64 have undergone this practice¹⁹; in Malaysia, it particularly affects certain ethnic groups where the percentage of mutilated women is close to 90%²⁰. FGM is also practised in Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines, but the lack of official data makes it difficult to estimate the phenomenon in all its complexity.

The practice of “cutting” also follows the communities where it is practised during the migration route. Although several studies have shown that among migrant women living abroad there is a lower propensity to subject their daughters to this practice, the phenomenon is nonetheless present and deserves constant attention.

In Europe, it is estimated that there are 600,000 survivors of genital mutilation and roughly 190,000 young or very young women are at risk²¹. In England, where the *National Health Service* has been collecting statistics on this phenomenon since 2015, it recorded 14,355 visits from 2023 to 2024, up 15% from 12,475 the previous year. The number of girls and women who went to a hospital or their GP to ask for information or to treat this problem also increased, from 5,870 to 6,655 in the same period²².

In the United States, where a federal law banning this practice was only passed in 2020, the number of victims and people at risk ranges from 421,000.

¹⁵ <https://www.unfpa.org/data/dashboard/fgm>

¹⁶ “WHO guideline on the prevention of female genital mutilation and clinical management of complications”, WHO, 2024 - <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/381102/9789240107281-eng.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-04-2025-who-issues-new-recommendations-to-end-the-rise-in--medicalized--female-genital-mutilation-and-support-survivors>

¹⁸ Five reasons why we must break the silence on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM) in Southeast Asia, Unfpa, <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/news/5-reasons-why-we-must-break-silence-female-genital-mutilationcutting-fgm-southeast-asia>

¹⁹ <https://www.fgmcri.org/country/indonesia/>

²⁰ <https://www.fgmcri.org/country/malaysia/>

²¹ https://www.endfgm.eu/editor/files/2024/08/Updated_Map_2024.pdf

²² ‘Call for greater protection for girls as FGM cases rise by 15% in England’, *The Guardian*, 19 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/sep/19/nhs-reports-increase-in-female-genital-mutilation-cases>

Chapter 3

Education, still too many girls out of school



Highlights

- Only 40.6% of Afghan girls attend primary school.
- Not educating girls is estimated to cost 15-30 trillion dollars worldwide.
- The number of NEETs is declining in OECD countries, including Italy. However, the gender gap persists.

Fifteen-year-old Ramzia has not been to school in over four years: *"I feel devastated and lost. I miss my friends, my classmates and my teachers. Every day I do the housework, help my mother at home and sometimes I draw, but it is not the same. I used to spend my days learning, growing and dreaming about my future. Now everything seems uncertain.*

In mid-August 2021, the Taliban retook control of Afghanistan. Just a month later they announced that the following March, when the school year resumed, girls over the age of 12 would not be allowed to return to the classroom. Like Ramzia, Laala is one of the many teenagers who saw her dreams fall apart then: *"If schools had not been closed, I would now be attending my first semester at university. I waste my days doing housework: cleaning, cooking, mending clothes'²³.*

Her fear is that sooner or later her family will resolve to force her to get married.

²³ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/new-school-year-starts-afghanistan-almost-400000-more-girls-deprived-their-right>

"This decision (by the Taliban, ed.) continues to damage the future of millions of Afghan girls: if this ban persists until 2030, more than four million young girls will be deprived of the right to education after primary school," UNICEF denounces.

Access to education for Afghan girls is often already jeopardized long before the age of 12: since the Taliban's return to power, female enrolment in primary school has also dropped. Only 40.6% of girls attend primary school, in comparison the figure is 54.1% for their male peers. Data collected by the United Nations Women's Agency (UN Women) in 2024 reveal that on average, Afghan women attended just over three years of school, compared to six for men²⁴.

No progress

251 million children are absent at roll call. "A number that has decreased by just 1 per cent since 2015," warns Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of the United Nations Agency for Culture (Unesco), commenting on data from the 'Global Education Monitoring Report'²⁵.

Even compared to the previous edition of the **indifesa** dossier, the situation remains unchanged.

Worldwide, there are approximately 122 million girls and young women who have never had the chance to set foot in a classroom, or who had to interrupt their studies too early (because they were forced to marry or work to contribute to their family's survival)²⁶. The majority, some 50 million, live in sub-Saharan Africa (where gender equality in education has not yet been achieved in any school cycle) and 42 million live in South Asian countries²⁷.

Among those who do go to school, there is some encouraging data: the increase in the female school completion rate. Between 2015 and 2024 this rose to:

- ➔ 86% to 89% in primary school
- ➔ 74% to 79% in lower secondary
- ➔ and 54% to 61% in upper secondary education.

The importance of women's education is widely recognised and supported by concrete evidence. Girls who have completed secondary education, staying in school until the age of 18, tend to marry later, thus avoiding the risk of early pregnancies. In addition, better educated women are more likely to find well-paid work, thus improving their own income, that of their family, and even the economy of their community as a whole.

On the other hand, **not educating girls represents a cost** (in the form of lost productivity in their working lives and lost earnings for their countries' economies) **estimated by the World Bank at USD 15-30 trillion**. Unlocking women's full potential by ensuring them access to education and employment would enable African countries to generate USD 2.4 trillion in extra income²⁸.

Education under attack

Wars and extreme weather events are other obstacles that can undermine the right to education for women. The World Bank points out that **in fragile countries plagued by conflict or widespread lack of safety, girls are 2.5 times more at risk of dropping out of school than their peers**²⁹.

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ *Global education monitoring report 2024-2025*, UNESCO, 2025

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ Count me in. Improving education outcomes of girls and young women, World Bank, 2025 -

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099351206182529156/pdf/IDU-aa4bc5d5-8445-4db6-b80e-b24b4dcc2121.pdf>

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ *Ibid*

During conflicts, schools and teachers are often targets for the parties involved: between 2022 and 2023, at least 6,000 “attacks on education” were reported, affecting more than 10,000 students. An average of eight attacks per day, a 20% increase over the previous two years³⁰, denounces the 'Education Under Attack 2024' report by the Global Coalition to Protect Education.

Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, and Nigeria were the most affected countries.

Moreover, there are some countries where women and girls have been deliberately targeted by armed groups: in Afghanistan and Pakistan, girls' schools have been attacked, bombed and set on fire in order to prevent them from being able to study. In Colombia, Cameroon, Sudan, and South Sudan, armed groups and the military have been responsible for rape and violence in schools or universities. "For girls who are victims of these attacks," the coalition reports, "resuming their studies is much more difficult than for boys.

A tool for the empowerment of the most vulnerable

Terre des Hommes' work in the field of education has always been aimed at empowering the most vulnerable boys and girls – such as those with disabilities or victims of conflict and social and economic exclusion – to achieve a quality primary and secondary education, in order to break the cycle of poverty and social exclusion. Terre des Hommes' *education in emergency* project performs a wide range of activities, here the two components of education and protection are closely linked, focussing not only on preventing school drop-out but also on the psychosocial wellbeing of girls, boys and adolescents.

In 2024, 56% of the nearly 75,000 direct beneficiaries of education projects were girls and young women.

A marked gender gap among NEETs

The problem of school dropout is not only specific only to low- and middle-income countries: in the so-called industrialised West there is also a significant share of teenagers and young adults who are not studying and not working, the so-called NEET (*Not in Education, Employment or Training*).

The 2024 edition of the 'Education at Glance' report³¹ of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) contains good news: between 2016 and 2023 in most of the organisation's member countries, the numbers of these decreased. The improvement is evident in one particular age group, the 18-24 age group, where the share of NEETs dropped by two percentage points, from 15% to 13%.

Eurostat, the European Union's statistical office, also certifies an improvement in their overall incidence in the various EU countries, from 15.7 per cent in 2014 to 11 per cent in 2024. Some countries - including the Netherlands, Sweden, Malta, Ireland, Slovenia, Germany, Denmark and Portugal - already have an incidence of less than 9 per cent, the threshold indicated by Brussels as the EU target to be reached by 2030.

However, if one takes into account the data broken down by gender, the picture takes on a more nuanced perspective. The incidence of girls neither studying nor working out of the total in the 15-29 age group dropped from 17.3% in 2014 to 12.1% in 2024. However, in almost all EU countries (except Estonia, Finland, Belgium and Sweden) there are more NEET girls than boys. Romania is the country with the

³⁰ "Education under attack 2024", Global Coalition to Protect Education, 2025

³¹ 'Education at glance 2024', OECD - https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/09/education-at-a-glance-2024_5ea68448/c00cad36-en.pdf

highest incidence of both NEETs in absolute terms (19.4 per cent) and females alone (25 per cent), followed by Italy (with a 16.6 per cent incidence among girls), Lithuania, Greece and Cyprus.

There is also another issue to consider: as they get older, young women leave training and education more frequently, but do not enter the labour market.

In the 25-29 age group, the gap is the widest: male NEETs make up 11.6 per cent while females reach 17.9 per cent.

Surprisingly, in this age group even 'virtuous' countries have a significant gender difference. Two examples:

- ➔ GERMANY: 8.1% NEET males - 13.6% NEET females
- ➔ DENMARK: 8.7% NEET males - 11.2% NEET females

Italy: great regional variances

Let's start with some good news: Italy too shows an improvement, certified by Istat (Italian National Statistics Agency) data, in the 15-29 age group:

In 2018	In 2024
23.2%	15.2%

However, the gender gap still remains wide: among girls the incidence is 16.6% while among boys is 13.8%. And the gap widens further for immigrants, one in three of whom do not study or work.

In line with what has been observed in other European countries, there is no gender gap in the 15-19 age group. The gap begins to widen between the ages of 25-29, where a 9.6% gender gap is observed, and then is at its widest between the ages of 30-34 when it reaches 16.3%³².

In the South, a girl is always more likely to become a NEET than a girl in the North or Centre of Italy, regardless of her educational qualification.

³² Terre des Hommes research on Istat data - https://esploradati.istat.it/databrowser/#/it/dw/categories/IT1,Z0500LAB,1.0/LAB_OFFER/LAB_OFF_SUPPLDATA/DCCV_NEET1/DCCV_NEET1_INCIDNEET/IT1,172_931_DF_DCCV_NEET1_7,1.0

Chapter 4

Child Marriage: defeating poverty is the best antidote



Photo: Stefano Carboni

Highlights

- Around 640 million girls between 20 and 24 years old were married when they were still underage.
- A third of all child brides in the world live in just one country: India.
- Girls living in sub-Saharan Africa face the highest risk of early marriage in the world: one in three marries before the age of 18.
- It will take 300 years before early marriages are eliminated.

Are child marriages only a consequence of a cultural heritage? Apparently, the phenomenon is also strongly connected to the economic situation. **If financial assistance were paid to the poorest families, it would be possible to reduce the rates of early marriage among girls living in rural communities.** This conclusion was drawn by two researchers in Indonesia who measured the effectiveness of the 'Keluarga Harapan' ('Hope for Families') program launched in 2006 by the government to combat poverty, improve the health conditions of women and children, and facilitate access to education.

The programme now supports around 10 million families a year: those selected receive an amount equal to about 40% of their total monthly expenses provided that, among other things, they commit to sending their children to school.³³

³³ "Child marriages remain common in many regions of the world", *The Conversation*, 2025 - bit.ly/3Tioyio

Although defeating child marriage is not one of the project's priority objectives, positive outcomes have been observed in this area as well because of it. Taking into account a sample of about one million girls between 14 and 17 years old among the families benefiting from the 'Keluarga Harapan' programme and comparing them with a group of young women of the same age belonging to families with a similar income, but not beneficiaries, a difference was noticed.

“The programme reduced the incidence of child marriages by 3.5%, going from 8.7% to 5.2% of the total number of girls,” write Sudarno Sumarto and Jan Priebe.

“Our study shows that these programmes can generate positive benefits far beyond their main objectives, such as the fight against poverty or health and education of children. This should be taken into account when discussing its cost-effectiveness”.

The case of Indonesia highlights how **poverty and early marriage are closely linked**. For families who belong to impoverished communities, arranging marriage for their underage daughters is often seen as an escape from poverty, or is part of traditional cultural norms. This clashes with the fact that **early marriages represent a real violation of the rights of girls and young women**, depriving them of their childhood and jeopardising their well-being and future. Any adolescents who marry before the age of 18 are **more likely to experience domestic violence**, have **early pregnancies** and **interrupt their studies**, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

The data prepared by Unicef clearly ³⁴ highlights the relationship between the incidence of early marriages and family wealth: both globally and in individual regions, the former decreases as the latter increases. Let's start with global data: in the richest 20% of the population, only 7.9% of girls were married before the age of 18, while in the poorest 20% the incidence rises to 33.5%. A trend that is repeated on all the continents for which we have data available: in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, child brides are just over 11% in the richest segments of the population and 49% in the poorest; while in Central and Southern Asia it ranges from 10% to 40%.

Early marriages are on the decline, but that isn't enough.

In absolute terms, around 640 million girls between 20 and 24 years old were married before they turned 18. Almost half live in South Asian countries (45%), 20% in sub-Saharan Africa, 15% in East Asia and the Pacific region, 9% in Latin America and the Caribbean.

A third of all child brides in the world (more than 200 million) live in a single country: India. A similar number of baby brides live in the countries that occupy the next ten positions in this sad ranking: Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Nigeria, Brazil, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Mexico, Iran, and Egypt.

Thanks to the efforts put in place by governments, local and international institutions, activists and NGOs, child marriages are decreasing: in 2002 this practice affected one in four girls (25%), twenty years later one in five (19%). Overall, **between 1997 and 2022, more than 68 million girls and young women avoided marriage before the age of 18 and were able to continue living their own lives.**

The progress, however, is not enough. The decline is not fast enough to reach zero by 2030, as required by the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (*SDG Sustainable Development Goal*).

*“At the current rate, it will take another 300 years before child marriages are eliminated”*³⁵ writes Unicef in the report *“Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach?”*, which collects the most recent data available worldwide.

³⁴ <https://childmarriagedata.org/global-trends/>

³⁵ *“Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach?”*, Unicef, 2023 - bit.ly/44wYPzF

The best results in the fight against child marriage were recorded in South Asian countries, where the incidence of this phenomenon decreased from 46% to 26% between 1997 and 2022³⁶. The same applies to India where, although the numbers are still alarming, a report released last November by the government reports that child marriages halved from 47.4% in 2006 (the year in which the *Prevention of Child Marriage Act came into force*) to 23.3% in the period 2019-2021³⁷.

Worrying signs

An improvement can also be seen in the Middle East and North Africa: in 1997 this phenomenon affected more than 30% of girls between 20 and 24 years old, while now less than 20% were married when they were still minors.

The exception, in this sense, is Iraq, where 28% of girls get married before the age of 18: a figure that in some districts (including Basra, Kerbala, Najaf and Missan) fluctuates between 33% and 43%.

Although the data is limited - the *Girls Not Brides* coalition points out - forced marriages are widespread especially among internally displaced persons and among Syrian refugees living in the country³⁸.

And the situation could get even worse: in January 2025, in fact, the Iraqi Parliament cancelled the rule prohibiting marriages for girls and boys under 18, transferring all powers to regulate this delicate matter to the religious authorities. Although the measure has been suspended by the Supreme Court, international organizations urge us continue to pay attention: if implemented, this measure will undermine “decades of reforms that have established greater protections for women and girls and have helped to unify the country's family law provisions,” warns Equality Now³⁹.

In the face of a generalized reduction in child marriages, there are two areas of the world in which improvements are still too slow. The first is sub-Saharan Africa, where girls are at the highest risk of early marriage in the world: one in three marries before the age of 18. There have been some improvements but “a closer look reveals that all the progress has occurred in the richest sections of the population”⁴⁰.

No progress has been recorded in Latin America and the Caribbean in the last 25 years: according to forecasts, by 2030 it will become the second-highest region globally, in terms of the incidence of child marriage, after sub-Saharan Africa.

indifesa Stories

New dreams for Bimala

When I asked Bimala* if she was angry with her family for forcing her to marry a stranger, she said, “No”. I tried to understand if she felt she owed something to life. Another “no”. If she wanted something else. Again, “no”.

We were in a Terre des Hommes shelter in South-East India. I am a 29-year-old Italian journalist, the daughter of a capitalist culture, full of useless thoughts. She is 16 years old, the mother of a small child, Indian, the daughter of a culture still torn apart by caste discrimination, empty of superfluous thoughts. Bimala was rocking Neel, seven months old.

“What does freedom mean to you?”. Silence hung in the air.

Bimala looked at her son and then whispered, “He makes me happy”. In the room coloured by saris and kurtas, there seems to be room only for the future. The dreams are girl-sized: “Study”; “Work”; “Be independent”. Bimala makes flowers out of paper, reads and writes, meditates, prays, goes to psychotherapy, and socialises with other teenagers. All of them have touched the abyss, but none of them are alone now.

³⁶ *Ibid*

³⁷ “Child marriages have halved since the introduction of law preventing them”, *The Hindhu*, 27/11/2024 bit.ly/3uLygsJ

³⁸ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/iraq/>

³⁹ <https://equalitynow.org/news/news-and-insights/legal-amendments-in-iraq-threaten-the-rights-of-women-and-girls/>

⁴⁰ “Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach?”, Unicef, 2023 - bit.ly/44wYPzF

And it is there, in that world where fear is democratic and pain asymmetrical, that our encounter brings a similarity to the surface: friendship. That, say the girls cared for by Terre des Hommes, saves them.

Virginia Nesi, journalist, writes for Sette and Corriere della Sera

*Fictitious name to protect the privacy of the protagonist

indifesa Stories

A rite that changes girls' lives

"I was married when I was a child, I was 15, before I even knew what marriage really was. I was a disobedient girl, one day I stayed out late with my boyfriend and then my parents told me not to return home again. So I went to that guy and he took me with him, but for me it was painful, because it wasn't what I expected. I got pregnant early, I was only a child when it happened.

When it was time to give birth, I suffered a lot because I was too young. It was difficult to raise the child, it blocked me in so many ways. I had to leave school, I couldn't attend it anymore and I couldn't do the things my peers did. Today I have four children, but we can't take care of them in the right way, because I gave birth to them when I was still a child".

The story is told by Kudzai Musengiwa, a woman from Chiwororo, a village in the Chiredzi district, in Zimbabwe.

Here, and in 3 other districts, Terre des Hommes is carrying out the PREaCH project to prevent the phenomenon of child marriage, which is deeply rooted in the poorest areas and in certain religious communities. For example, among the Apostolic, 42% of girls are married before the age of 18, among the Pentecostals 21%, and among the Zionists 34%.

PREaCH aims to involve traditional and religious leaders and women who traditionally act as intermediaries to arrange marriages, with the aim of encouraging a cultural change.

We are working to change the practice of Ukhomba, which prepares young women for marriage immediately after the menarche, involving the guardians of this initiation rite. Traditionally, after the practice (which consists of spending a few days in the savanna in a group), girls perceive themselves as adults, but having not received adequate sexual education, they are exposed to violence and abuse within any early relationships.

Without taking away the symbolic value of the rite, this can become an opportunity to transmit some knowledge on sexual and reproductive health, menstrual hygiene, gender violence and the rights of girls and girls, in short, to make them aware citizens. Even boys, during the rite that takes place alone for them, can be given valuable information on how to base their future relationships on mutual respect.

Within PREaCH, many other activities are planned to raise awareness and involve girls in schools, as well as training to promote their economic empowerment through the creation of micro-enterprises with activities compatible with school commitments, thereby offering effective alternatives to early and forced marriages.

"I thought my life would end if I got married very early. Now I'm raising goats and I'm learning the basics of entrepreneurship. My classmates and I will be able to earn enough to cover school expenses and put something aside. Our goats have given us back our future," said a smiling Maud, one of the girls involved in the project that opened up wider possibilities for life.

Forced marriages in Italy

In this country, the compulsion or induction into marriage was introduced as a case of crime with Law 69, called the 'Red Code', which came into force in 2019. The aim was to protect the free consent of the parties to enter into marriage or civil union, avoiding physical and/or psychological pressure. Given the

possible ultra-national aspect of the phenomenon, it has been envisaged that the crime can be prosecuted even if committed abroad by an Italian citizen or a foreigner resident in Italy.

According to the most recent report⁴¹ prepared by the Criminal Analysis Service of the Central Criminal Police Directorate, in the first half of 2024 there was an increase of 67% compared to the similar interval of the previous year, going from 9 to 15 victims.

The incidence of female victims also shows an increase, reaching 91%, compared to 89% in the first half of 2023; of these, 60% are minors and 60% are foreign nationals. *“This increase,”* states the report, *“can also be interpreted from the point of view of the physiological process of progressive application of the new norm, based on a growing awareness of the victims who report most frequently”*.

GOOD TO KNOW!

- Over the last 20 years, more than 68 million girls and young women have avoided marriage before the age of 18.
- In India, the rate of early marriage has halved, falling from 47.4% to 23.3%.

⁴¹ poliziadistato.it/statics/17/rapporto-violenza-sulle-donne.pdf

Chapter 5

Sexual and reproductive health and early pregnancy: cuts to aid lead to dire consequences for girls and young women



Photo: Alberto Molinari

Highlights

- Cuts to international aid by the US government will leave 9 million girls and women in Afghanistan and about 1.7 million in Pakistan without maternal health services.
- Every year in low and middle-income countries around 21 million girls between the ages of 15 and 19 get pregnant.
- Globally, 210,000 new HIV infections occur every year among adolescent girls and young women aged 15 to 24, of which about 170,000 occur in sub-Saharan African countries alone.

The 'Dreams' project changed the life of Ruhiya Bakari, a teenager living in a slum in Mombasa (Kenya): "*It paid my school fees, provided me with sanitary towels*". In addition, like her peers, Ruhiya was able to attend sex education courses during which she learned how to prevent unwanted pregnancies and avoid HIV infection⁴².

At the beginning of 2025, however, the project's activities were cancelled due to an executive order by US President Donald Trump that blocked federal funding to USAID (the US government's international aid agency) and Pefar (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief)⁴³.

⁴² "No Aid, No Surrender: How Mombasa stepped up after USA pulled out", Willow Health Media, 2025 bit.ly/40n7vWR

⁴³ In July 2025, the US Congress decided to set aside a USD 400 million fund for Pefar, allowing some activities to be restarted.

In the space of a few weeks, almost all projects financed by the two organisations, including 'Dreams', came to a standstill, plunging tens of thousands of people into despair. Young women, orphaned children and single mothers who contracted HIV depended on the project for access to antiretroviral drugs. Since the discontinuing of the programme 66,000 girls have been left without support and health workers have already recorded an increase in teenage pregnancies.

"We know from our partners that some people have died, we have reports of new HIV infections. But I think what we are observing now is just the tip of the iceberg", a former USAID employee who asked to remain anonymous told the US television network Pbs⁴⁴.

UNAIDS, the UN agency for HIV and AIDS, provides a rather alarming overview. US government cuts could cause **six million new HIV infections** and **four million AIDS deaths** by 2029⁴⁵. In particular, the youngest women will pay the highest price. First of all, because adolescents and girls in this age group represent one of the most vulnerable groups to the HIV virus with **210,000 new infections registered globally** (out of a total of 1.3 million), of which about **170,000 in sub-Saharan African countries alone**.

In south-east Africa, among young people between the ages of 15 and 24, almost eight out of ten new infections (77%) are contracted by girls. Yet despite the emergency, "preventive services for young people, in particular adolescent girls and young women in Africa are being cut back" reads the report⁴⁶.

Lack of funds for girls' health

It is not only HIV prevention that is compromised. USAID cuts have also caused challenges for Unfpa, the UN Population Fund, which plays a key role in protecting the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls, providing obstetric and family planning services, and taking care of victims of violence. "On 26 February, we were informed that almost all contributions from USAID and the US State Department had been cancelled," reported the agency's director. "This decision will have devastating impacts on girls and women"⁴⁷.

It is estimated that cuts in Unfpa programmes will leave **9 million girls and women without maternal health services in Afghanistan and about 1.7 million in Pakistan. In Bangladesh**, services to care for victims of violence will be eliminated, **leaving over 600,000 women without assistance**⁴⁸. In the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, President Trump's decision blocked the distribution of around **100,000 emergency kits for girls and women victims of rape**⁴⁹.

The consequences of teenage pregnancy

In order to understand how crucial USAID funds were for girls, it is useful to gather some data, starting with the data on early pregnancies.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), around **21 million girls** between the ages of 15 and 19 **get pregnant** every year in low- and middle-income countries, half of these cases are unplanned and unwanted pregnancies. In 2021 there were **12.1 million births** among young women between the ages of 15 and 19, and about 499,000 among the very young (10-14 years).

"Premature pregnancies can have serious physical and psychological consequences for girls," explains Pascale Allotey, Director of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Research at WHO⁵⁰.

⁴⁴ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-usaid-cuts-are-impacting-the-fight-against-hiv-in-kenya>

⁴⁵ "AIDS, crisis and the power to transform", UNAIDS Global AIDS Update 2025 - bit.ly/3UfGGQS

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ <https://www.unfpa.org/press/statement-unfpa-executive-director-united-states-government-funding-cuts>

⁴⁸ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/02/1160631>

⁴⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/usaid-cancelled-rape-survivor-kits-congo-conflict-erupted-2025-07-01/>

⁵⁰ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/04/1162511>

Physical problems: teenage pregnancy carries serious risks, including higher rates of infections, premature births and problems during pregnancy, labour and delivery.

"Complications related to pregnancy and childbirth are responsible for approximately 1 in 23 deaths among adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 19 worldwide," report Unicef and Unfpa⁵¹.

Psychological and social problems:

- baby mothers are generally forced to interrupt their studies and give up their own desires and plans;
- if they are unmarried, girls are often stigmatised and marginalised within their own community;
- they are at risk of becoming single mothers: single parent households in which the head of household is a young woman amount to some 3.8 million globally, many of them under 17 years of age⁵².

Like marriages, early pregnancies are also **closely linked to poverty**. Globally, young women in the poorest 20% of the population are 3.7 times more likely to give birth before the age of 18 than those in the richest 20%⁵³.

Early pregnancy is an issue that does not only concern poorer countries. For example, in the **US**, the rate of early pregnancies (i.e. the number of live births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19) in 2023 was 13.1⁵⁴. In absolute numbers we are talking about 141,000 children born to underage mothers. The phenomenon has been declining since the early 1990s but "*disparities still exist between different ethnic groups*". Among Native American teenage girls the rate of early pregnancy is 20.9 per 1,000 births, among Hispanic girls it is 20.8, among African American girls it is 19.3. More than twice as high as white girls (8.4) and almost ten times as high as young girls of Asian origin (1.8)⁵⁵.

Early pregnancies and abortions in Italy

Italy is not immune to this phenomenon, even if it has seen a steady decline over the years. In 2023 (latest available data) there were 1,829 births to mothers aged between 14 and 18, 55 fewer than in 2022. In 78% of the cases the mothers were Italian, in the remaining 22% foreign. With 480 births, Sicily is the region with the most baby mothers, followed by Campania with 318 births, Lombardy with 209 and Apulia with 167.

The absolute number of births, however, may not be very indicative of the phenomenon and its real incidence on the total population. Comparing these data with the female adolescent population shows that Italy has a teenage fertility rate of 1.63 live births per 1,000⁵⁶.

Sicily remains the most affected region, with a fertility rate of 4.91 live births per thousand girls. They are followed by Molise (2.67), Campania (2.60), Apulia (2.18) and Calabria (1.83). Lombardy, which also ranks third in absolute numbers of baby mothers, has a lower fertility rate than the national average (1.09).

On the other hand, the increase in the use of voluntary termination of pregnancy (IVG) by minors is confirmed: the latest Report to Parliament records an abortion rate (i.e. the number of IVGs per 1,000 women) of 2.2 in 2022 compared to 1.9 in 2020. It is worth remembering, however, that since 2000 there

⁵¹ "GIRL GOALS: What has changed for girls? Adolescent girls' rights over 30 years", Unicef, UnWomen, 2025 - bit.ly/3TOujeq

⁵² *Ibid*

⁵³ <https://data.unicef.org/resources/girl-goals-report/>

⁵⁴ <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45184>

⁵⁵ *Ibid*

⁵⁶ The fertility rate was calculated using girls aged between 15 and 19 as the reference population. Births to mothers under the age of 15 have been excluded from the calculation to ensure consistency between numerator and denominator and to avoid rate distortion due to the inclusion of age groups with very low reproductive risk.

had been a gradual reduction in the use of voluntary termination of pregnancy among minors: even in 2010, the abortion rate in this age group was more than double (4.5 per 1,000) the rate in 2022⁵⁷.

Furthermore, the report highlights how the **abortion rate** among underage girls in Italy is lower than in European countries with similar social and health systems. Compared to a rate of 3.4 per 1,000 women under the age of 20 in Italy in 2022, France recorded 16.2, England and Wales 22, Spain 8.5 and Sweden 8.1.

⁵⁷ *Report of the Minister of Health on the implementation of the law containing norms for the social protection of maternity and the voluntary termination of pregnancy (Law 194/78) - bit.ly/44RJVF*

Chapter 6

Mental Health, negative signs not to underestimate



Photo: Sara Melotti

Highlights

- 42% of Ukrainian women and girls are at risk of depression.
- 49% of European girls claim to have a good level of mental well-being; in Italy that figure drops to 35%.
- 27% of girls in the US said they had thought about suicide at least once in the past year.

Today, more than 600 million women and girls live in conflict-affected areas – from Gaza to Ukraine, from Sudan to Myanmar, from the Sahel to the Democratic Republic of Congo. This figure is 50 per cent higher than 2017, leading not only to an increase in the number of victims, but also to severe trauma caused by fighting, displacement, and repression, with devastating impact on the mental health of those who survive.

Almost all people struck by a humanitarian crisis experience psychological distress. One in five will develop long-term mental disorders.⁵⁸

Since the start of the conflict in the Gaza Strip in 2023, there has been a sharp increase in the number of cases of severe anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, as shown in the November 2024 Unfpa report on the price paid by Gaza's youth for the war.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/inside-the-crisis-you-dont-see-how-war-impacts-womens-mental-health>

⁵⁹ "Shattered lives and dreams: the toll of the war on Gaza on young people", UNFPA, 2024 - bit.ly/4IXkVxk

The report collects testimonies of young people such as Rana, 15, a young woman displaced from the central governorate of the Strip, who remembers the terrifying explosions: "You were sitting down and all of a sudden there was an explosion right next to you, with children screaming and the body parts of the people who had been killed." Many girls report that the terror prevents them from sleeping, a situation they accept as their new normal. "We were displaced almost nine times and lost many of our family members," says Sara, 18. "Nowhere is safe and we live in constant fear of losing other relatives."

Suffering, with no peace in sight

"Night had just fallen when an Israeli missile hit our house. I lost my husband and three of my children in an instant. The house was completely destroyed. When I woke up, the pain was unbearable: I was covered in wounds and my leg had been amputated. Then I saw Rama, my 15-year-old daughter, who had suffered some burns but was awake. She even watched while they amputated her leg."

These are the words of Fadia, a 35-year-old woman living in Gaza City in a shelter for the displaced.

"I am worried about Rama's mental health," the woman continued. **"Before the war she was very good at school and had a very sunny disposition. Now she is depressed and always complains about pain. I dream of a lasting peace to finally find a life without too much suffering for me and my children."**

PMRS has provided care to Fadia and her daughter during these months of war, along with the other sick and wounded people housed in the same shelter. PMRS is an organisation of doctors, partner of Terre des Hommes in the Gaza Strip. In addition to medical care, the operators organise psychological and psychosocial support activities, especially geared towards girls, children and women.

In Ukraine, multiple factors threaten the well-being of girls and women: fear of bombings and of the fate their loved ones may face on the frontline, as well as rising unemployment and gender-based violence (up 36% since 2022). **42% of Ukrainian women and girls are at risk of depression**, 23% say they need counselling for themselves or a family member.⁶⁰

Girls' mental health in Europe and in the United States

ESPAD (*European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs*) has been monitoring the behaviour of young Europeans aged 15 to 16 years with regard to alcohol, cigarette and drug consumption for the past 30 years. For the first time, it has included mental health among the topics of its survey. The study summary⁶¹ published in May 2025 says, "The persistent effects of social isolation, educational disruptions and socio-economic instability have heightened concerns regarding youth mental health."

To assess the mental well-being of adolescents, the survey asked more than 113,000 students how their lives had been going recently. For example, how often they feel cheerful or wake up in the morning with a feeling of vitality. The results are definitely worrying, especially for young women and girls.

Girls are worse off than their male peers in all 37 countries where the study was conducted. In general, 59% of the sample stated that they had a good level of mental well-being, but **the prevalence among females is significantly lower (49%)** compared to males (70%).

⁶⁰ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/inside-the-crisis-you-dont-see-how-war-impacts-womens-mental-health>

⁶¹ *European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs*, EUDA, 2025 - bit.ly/44Qrpul - The full report will be published in October 2025.

Furthermore, **“the largest gender differences are observed in Italy (66% among boys compared to 35% among girls), Poland (64% and 33% respectively) and Sweden (78% and 48%)”**.

The picture is similar in the United States, where the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* - conducted annually by the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)* - found that four in 10 high school students have experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. These feelings are much more widespread (53%) among girls than their male peers (28%), and the situation has worsened over the past ten years: in 2013, 39% of girls in the sample group admitted to being sad or depressed (for boys that figure was 21%)⁶².

The data on suicidal thoughts is equally as alarming: **among the girls surveyed, 27% said they had thought about it at least once in the year** prior to the interview (it was 22% in 2013) and 13% actually attempted suicide (6% among male peers). But perhaps the most alarming figure concerns LGBTQIA+ people: 41% have had suicidal thoughts and 20% have tried to take their own life.

However, we shouldn't necessarily take the data at face value: do girls say they are sadder because they really are, or do they feel freer to admit to it?

There are studies that show girls are more likely to say they feel unwell. For example, the recent *European Health Report 2024*⁶³ by the World Health Organisation declares that girls "are more likely to report being lonely most or all of the time, with the rate doubling between those aged 11 years (14%) and those aged 15 years (28%)." Among boys, the increase is smaller, ranging from 8% to 13% in the same age range.

How influential are gender stereotypes, which demand young men to “be strong”?
These questions remain unanswered for now.

⁶² “*Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2013-2023*”, CDC, 2024 - bit.ly/44DttHN

⁶³ *European Health Report 2024* - WHO Europe - bit.ly/4f5Ysji

Chapter 7

Girls and Sport: the Goal? Overcoming Stereotypes



Photo: Marta Rybicka

Highlights

- Only 31.8% of girls and women in Italy play sports, compared to 43.4% of men.
- Girls and young women are more likely to give up sport (21.6% versus 15.1% of boys).
- The main reasons girls give up sport are lack of time and study demands, while for boys it is more a matter of losing interest and laziness.

Some stereotypes are tough to overcome, starting with those that draw a clear line between sports ‘for girls’ and sports ‘for boys’.

According to this view, the latter include football, rugby, boxing, where physical contact is more likely. When a girl expresses her desire to play these sports, she is often discouraged and is instead directed towards other disciplines such as volleyball, gymnastics or dance.

Of course, the situation has changed a lot since **Pierre de Coubertin strongly opposed women’s participation in Olympic Games competitions**, allowing them only to award medals to male athletes. Excluded from the 1896 games, **the first 12 female athletes appeared at the 1900 Paris Games**, competing at tennis and archery; 1928 saw women debut in athletics, though participation in distances over 200m was banned until 1960. Why? **It was thought that women could not physically endure the fatigue caused by sporting activity.**

Despite these obstacles, here we are in the present day, with Paris 2024 becoming the first Olympics to have equal numbers of male and female athletes.

The successes of women also have a positive impact on the ambitions of the younger generations. ‘When girls see themselves reflected at the top of sport, they see they belong in sport and can dream of a future filled with the exhilaration, passion and most importantly, the joy sport can bring’, reads a recent report⁶⁴ by the British charity *Women in Sport*, which measured the impact of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games on girls aged 13 to 24 in the UK. Not only has the number of those who love and play sport regularly increased, but **38% of the respondents dream of playing at a high level** (it was 29% in 2023).

Public interest in women's sports is also growing. The recent European Women's Football Championship, held in Switzerland from 2 to 27 July, was very well attended. Even before they started, 22 out of 31 matches were sold out. With 600,000 tickets sold, this was a record compared to the previous championship in 2022, for which sales only reached 575,000.⁶⁵

Benefits still limited to the few

Healthy sports activity is a powerful tool for wellbeing: it positively influences physical and mental health, promotes self-esteem and body acceptance, and improves social skills, time management, resilience and cultivates a sense of belonging.

It is therefore a pity that girls and young women play less sport than their male peers. According to the latest survey by Istat⁶⁶, **in Italy only 31.8% of women play sports, compared to 43.4% of men, and girls between the ages of 10 and 24 are more likely to stop going to the gym or playing sports than boys of the same age** (21.6% versus 15.1%).

Their reasons for giving up sports are also different: **girls cite lack of time and the demands of study, boys loss of interest and laziness.**

Where do girls and women prefer to play sports?

- Indoor facilities: 68.7%
- At home or in the common areas of their apartment blocks: 22.6%
- Outdoors: 21.7%

These responses highlight the widespread insecurity they feel in open spaces, especially when alone.

Coaching girls not to give up their dreams

In their recent campaign⁶⁷ *#KeepHerConfident*, Dove and Nike aim to counteract this female drop-out from sport by promoting greater self-esteem in one's physical appearance through a range of tools, including personal coaching courses. Among the ambassadors is tennis player Jasmine Paolini, a shining positive example of determination and body confidence.

Similarly, the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) has produced ‘*The future is female*’⁶⁸, a web-series featuring female footballers from the national team tackling various topics, such as body shaming or abuse.

The programme, part of the FIGC's social and environmental sustainability strategy, aims to dismantle the stereotypes of a sport that in Italy is still perceived as ‘masculine’. This is not true in the United States, for example, as evidence of cultural indicator. With this in mind, it is important to remember that **as of 1 July 2022, Italian female footballers have finally been recognised as professionals**, leaving amateurism

⁶⁴ ‘*Chasing the Olympic dream*’, Women in Sport, 2024 - bit.ly/3TX4Sr8

⁶⁵ insideworldfootball.com/2025/07/02/record-ticket-sales-euro-2025-fervour-growing-switzerland-ready-kick-off/

⁶⁶ ‘*La pratica sportiva in Italia*’ (Participation in sport in Italy), Istat, 2025 - bit.ly/3GEnysR

⁶⁷ <https://bodyconfidentsport.com/>

⁶⁸ sostenibilita.it/uguaglianza-e-inclusione/la-figc-lancia-il-futuro-e-donna-la-webserie-sullempowerment-femminile-che-vede-protagoniste-le-calciatrici-della-nazionale-qb7cs8qu

behind and being able to benefit from employment contracts and safeguards: an *'achievement of civilisation'* as President Gabriele Gravina called it.

Our Olympic toolkit for a stereotype-free future

Sporting events are more than just entertainment; they are also an excellent opportunity to promote the founding values of a society, such as respect, inclusion and mutual support.

In this regard, Terre des Hommes, in collaboration with the Milan Cortina 2026 Foundation and in view of the forthcoming Winter Olympics, has produced the **'Equality in the Field. Sport beyond stereotypes'** toolkit⁶⁹ to train new generations in values such as gender equality, amongst others.

The toolkit is recommended especially for schools, sports clubs and families. It consists of:

- **Teaching materials:** Insights into Olympic and Paralympic values, gender equality, disability and bullying, offering students new tools for reflection and discussion.
- **Practical exercises:** Suggestions for activities and games to be played in the classroom to stimulate debate and to raise awareness of active citizenship.

GOOD TO KNOW!

- Since 1995, the gap between the number of men and women who play sport in Italy has decreased by 5.4 percentage points.

⁶⁹ <https://terredeshommes.it/news/parita-in-campo-il-toolkit-educativo-per-un-futuro-senza-stereotipi/>

Chapter 8

Empowerment and Participation: Young Women in Search of Representation



Highlights

- In 123 years, we will achieve global gender equality! Maybe.
- Nowhere in the world has achieved complete equality. Iceland holds the top position in the ranking of most equal countries.
- Italy comes in 85th place in international rankings, two places higher than 2024 and remains generally stable.

How close are we to reaching global gender equality? The answer is discouraging: 123 years. In almost every part of social and economic life, being a young woman still means having less space, less of a voice and fewer opportunities.

None of the 148 countries analysed by the World Economic Forum for the 2025 edition of the *Global Gender Gap Report* have achieved complete equality between men and women in the four areas that are analysed each year: economic participation, education, health and political representation⁷⁰.

Globally, **the gender gap has narrowed to 68.8%** with an improvement of just 0.4 percentage points compared to the previous year, one of the smallest in the last decade.

⁷⁰ "Global Gender Gap Report 2025", World Economic Forum, 2025 - bit.ly/4fmrk6T

The most positive results can be seen in the areas of access to education and right to healthcare, while economic participation and particularly political representation are still far from equal.

Out of 187 parliaments monitored, only 61 have women holding important roles. When called to lead a ministry, women are usually assigned to those linked to gender, health and social affairs, while they remain underrepresented in the departments that determine economic strategy, defence and infrastructure. The consequence is that men continue to be the ones who direct national priorities, fiscal policy and the allocation of public investments "*in ways that often do not take into account the contribution of half the population to economic growth*", the report reads.

European Countries Take the Lead in Gender Equality

In the ranking of the most equitable countries, **Iceland is firmly in the lead (92.6%)**, the only country that has exceeded the 90% threshold since 2022. Eight of the top ten positions in the ranking are occupied by European countries.

The **top ten countries** closest to achieving complete gender equality

1. Iceland	92.6%
2. Finland	87.9%
3. Norway	86.3%
4. United Kingdom	83.8%
5. New Zealand	82.7%
6. Sweden	81.7%
7. Moldova	81.3%
8. Namibia	81.1%
9. Germany	80.3%
10. Ireland	80.1%

Europe and North America are the two regions of the world with the best gender score, followed by Latin America, "*the region that has made the most significant progress: 8.6 percentage points since 2006*". At the end of the ranking is the region of the Middle East and North Africa, with a score of 61.7%.

Giving the Microphone to Young Women

To close the gender gap, it is necessary to include the voices of girls and women in decision-making processes and support initiatives such as ***She Leads***, a training and empowerment programme carried out by a consortium of feminist associations and non-governmental organisations for children's rights – including Terre des Hommes. *She Leads* is active in some countries in East and West Africa and the Middle East and has already achieved key results, for example:

- In Ghana, it has contributed to the approval of the Affirmative Action Act, which sets a target of 50% leadership roles filled by women by 2030.
- In Sierra Leone, it played a key role in the approval of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act.
- In Lebanon, it has trained young women in public speaking, involving them in the production of 8 commercials on topics such as family law, divorce and inheritance etc. The videos were broadcast on MTV during *Ramadan*, a time when viewership is very high.

Italy Remains Stable

The latest edition of the *Global Gender Gap Report* does not report substantial changes in the situation in **Italy, is 85th place in the world**, just two places up compared to the previous year. At the European

level, Italy is low down in the ranking, in 35th place, far behind not only Spain (10th place) and France (19th) but also by Albania, Poland and Austria. A closer examination of the various indicators shows that Italy has almost closed the gender gap in education and health care but remains lacking in political representation and economic participation.

What does the climate crisis have to do with the gender gap?

The new geopolitical order is reshaping global priorities: wars, climate crises, energy instability and forced migration are intertwined in an increasingly complex mosaic. In this scenario, one cannot address social and environmental justice as distinct challenges. They are two sides of the same coin, and ignoring their interconnectedness means jeopardising progress on both fronts.

The communities most affected by the effects of the climate crisis are often those least responsible for its causes. Gender, economic and generational inequalities are exacerbated where policies capable of redistributing power, resources and opportunities are lacking. Girls who drop out of school due to water scarcity, women excluded from decision-making processes in the most fragile zones, indigenous peoples forced to leave their lands: these are just a few examples of how environment and rights are inseparable today.

In a global context where armed conflicts proliferate and military spending exceeds \$2.4 trillion, it is necessary to recognize the profound link between militarism, the environmental crisis and the denial of human rights. Wars devastate territories, pollute resources, hit civilians hard and fuel extractive and patriarchal economic systems.

According to Women7, the G7's official engagement group on equal opportunities, no country is currently on track to achieve gender equality by 2030 and more than a billion women live in regressive situations. To reverse the trend, a systemic approach is needed: socio-environmental due diligence obligations, transparency of supply chains and financing tied to concrete equity and sustainability results.

Policies must be co-designed with those who live through crises, overcoming any form of symbolic representation. Education plays a crucial role. The W7 calls on G7 and world leaders to invest in transformative, digital and climate education, and to strengthen disaggregated data to track progress. Participation must be real and informed: no transition will be just if it excludes those who have less of a voice.

A paradigm shift is needed: to recognize that climate justice and social justice are one and the same battle. Only through courageous alliance, targeted funding and concrete tools will it be possible to build a fair, sustainable and truly shared future.

Martina Rogato, President HRIC, Co-Chair W7 Italy.

The First “Bricks” Needed for Financial Empowerment

Italy lags significantly behind in the financial education of children and young people compared to many other countries: 18% of Italian students do not reach a basic level of financial competence and young woman have a gender gap of as much as 20 points compared to their male peers⁷¹.

⁷¹ PISA 2022 Results, OECD, 2024 - bit.ly/4m9SmQY

But you can also talk about money with children, as demonstrated by the project "Let's learn economics with LEGO®", which offers a playful approach to introduce them to understanding how money and savings work. Springing from the collaboration between the Global Thinking Foundation and Bricks4Kidz®, the project is based on the **use of LEGO® bricks to visually represent complex economic concepts**, such as the difference between supply and demand or the breakdown of income and expenditure. In just a few months, more than 100 primary schools and nurseries have signed up, helping boys and girls discover that managing money can be a skill within their capabilities, and not solely reserved for adults.

Through play, the children have finally made sense of words that were mysterious — such as "salary" and "bills" — and have learned to talk about a topic considered taboo even by some adults.

A young girl told us: **“Before, money scared me a bit, now I know that I can make plans too, not just my parents”**.

Claudia Segre, President of the Global Thinking Foundation, said: *"Tackling the gender gap means starting early, in primary school classrooms, where young girls are often not represented in STEM courses. With this project we wanted to build, brick by brick, a new awareness: that young girls can also talk about the economy, numbers and choices, without fear and without stereotypes. In Europe, only 18% of professionals in the ICT sector are women, and in Italy less than one in five girls enrol in STEM courses after high school. This is where we must intervene: with concrete tools, with inclusive language and with paths that give confidence and insight. Because empowerment begins with the right to imagine oneself in every future possible"*.

Elisabetta Priano, Head of Education and Schools Goal4, Global Thinking Foundation ETS and **Cinzia Liodice**, Partner Bricks4Kidz® Italia

Left or right? Divided young people, girls involved

"I always thought that one of the strengths of my generation was our ability to come together to get what we want, not settle for the status quo.

Yet, a gender-related political division is now evident: more and more young people are looking to the right, attracted by identity-based and reactive messages, driven by online subcultures such as "incel" or "alpha male". They feel cut off from the discourses on inclusion, typical of the left, as if that world did not concern them and they were afraid that it could only lead them to get off the pedestal on which they were born.

More and more girls, on the other hand, are siding with the left, driven by feminist and progressive demands. We are used to fighting for our rights, and we see this both in history and in everyday life. It is therefore inevitable, that we sympathize with progressive movements that are typical of the left," says Elisabetta Ascione, participant in the Politik-her project⁷², the first European project of Prime Minister, a political school for women.

Voting preferences of girls under 30 tend to the left, their male peers to the right. This is one of the clearest findings from recent research by Bocconi University⁷³, which found a young but deeply polarized generation. 41% of young women identify with the centre-left, only 11% with the centre-right. Whereas among young men, 34% of preferences steer to the right. A division that does not only concern politics, but also identity, imagination, and insecurity.

In our experience with *Prime Minister*, we see what is behind those numbers every day. The young women who take part in our initiatives do not come with party affiliations, but with urgent questions: on climate change, mental health, gender-based violence, the very possibility of existing and deciding for oneself.

⁷² A project co-financed by the European Union through the Erasmus+ program and supported by Prime Minister and other European associations, which aims to give young women a voice and make them protagonists of change in their communities.

⁷³ Bocconi, Department of Social and Political Sciences, <http://bit.ly/3HchkQS>

Polarization does not arise in a vacuum. **Girls want a space for expression and protection on fundamental issues:** reproductive rights, equality and the fight against discrimination. They experience politics as a means of liberation, not just sharing an ideology. And they do so in new ways, often not recognized by public discourse.

Alongside these struggles, new priorities are emerging: the protection of mental health – which has now become a feminist theme –, safety in public and digital spaces and the need for an inclusive school which is able to listen. These are struggles that run through the lives of our participants, and that call for representation not only in electoral programs, but in political language and practice.

Girls vote (and fight) to change the status quo. Boys, more often, uphold it. But this simplification, useful for analysing a trend, is not enough. It is necessary to understand what is missing from the male political discourse, because a large part of the young electorate identify with muscular, conservative, sometimes regressive messages.

"Even today, there are still many civic and social struggles that ought to be carried forward to achieve gender equality, from deconstructing the patriarchy itself to forming a new, free, and more fluid gender ideology. The most pressing, and crucially, most relevant struggle to this day, is the collective rejection of a violent, possessive patriarchal culture, which today, as in the past, causes more and more female victims, an enormous, ever-growing silent army of sufferers of injustice and violence," testifies the student Michela Rezzesi of PM Firenze.

Meanwhile, girls continue to create spaces, practices and speeches. To politicize the experience. To rewrite priorities. Waiting for politics to learn to truly listen to them.

Angela Laurenza, co-founder and President of Prime Minister, School of Politics for Young Women

Stand Up for Girls 2025 – an event with special energy



'Stand up for Girls!' is an event organised by Terre des Hommes to change our perspective on gender issues, with the help of personalities from the worlds of entertainment, culture and sport. The 2025 edition featured some important new developments:

- after three successful editions in Milan, we moved to Rome, involving schoolchildren from the capital, who flocked to the Teatro Nazionale in large numbers;
- we had a special main sponsor at our side, the Acea group.

We asked president **Barbara Marinali** a few questions to understand how companies can also commit to gender equality.

Why did you decide to support Terre des Hommes' *indifesa* Campaign?

The Acea Group has always been attentive to gender issues, and its support for the *indifesa* Campaign demonstrates its commitment to equality and to adopting concrete measures aimed at reducing the gap and improving the effectiveness of policies that protect the most vulnerable groups. The 'Stand Up for Girls!' event, organised as part of Terre des Hommes' *indifesa* campaign, is part of the official programme of the *Sustainable Development Festival*, which for years has been an important opportunity to raise awareness of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda Goals. Daily news reports show us how deeply rooted stereotypes and gender-based violence still are among the younger generations, and the hope is that initiatives such as these will encourage reflection and serve as a source of inspiration for new models and new ways of talking about gender issues. Acea wants to actively contribute to building a more equitable and inclusive future for all.

What feedback did you receive from your employees who participated in *Stand Up for Girls*?

Very positive. The event, which attracted an audience of over 400 people, was attended by senior company executives and a number of distinguished guests from Acea, including Ines Gandini, member of the Board of Statutory Auditors of Acea S.p.A.; Elisabetta Maggini, member of the Board of Directors of Acea S.p.A.; and Giovanni Salvi, former Attorney General at the Court of Cassation. We received many enthusiastic comments from our collaborators and various representatives of the teaching staff of 107 secondary schools in Rome, who were involved through the Education and Training Department of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma and the 50 students of ADI - Assodanza Italia.

Everyone appreciated not only the show, but also the themes addressed, because they convey social values and facilitate dialogue and interaction with young people.

Where does Acea's commitment to gender equality come from and what does your certification entail?

The Acea Group's mission is to improve people's well-being, promote talent and implement the achievement of true gender equality. In December 2022, it received UNI/PdR 125:2022 certification from RINA Services, the only national standard on gender equality that also provides guidelines for supporting the professional growth of women within companies. On 23 June this year, Acea obtained the renewal of its Gender Equality Certification, with the extension to six other companies in the Group (Acea Ambiente, areti, Acea Ato2, Acea Infrastructure, Acea Energia and Acea Acqua). This is a significant step forward in the path towards Diversity & Inclusion, demonstrating the Group's ongoing commitment to promoting an inclusive culture.

Do you have any dedicated programmes for the employment of young women?

On 12 May this year, Acea won the #Riparto tender '*Mamma con Acea nei tuoi primi 1.000 giorni*' (Mum with Acea in your first 1,000 days) - issued by the Department for Family Policies at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers - to support working mothers. The project aims to facilitate the return of mothers to work, encourage childbirth and promote work-life integration. Among the measures introduced are: maternity bonuses, 'welcome back kits', additional leave for paediatric specialist visits and compulsory vaccinations, two maternity replacement hires, a network of parenting support services, skills development courses for new mothers with children aged 0 to 3, a mum empowerment programme, taxi services for mothers, work-life balance policies and a mental and physical wellbeing programme.

Some of your initiatives promote the fight against gender-based violence: are there any internal tools to support your female employees in difficulty?

As part of the project launched on 8 March 2020 – in collaboration with WeWorld and Welfare Come Te – with the aim of raising awareness of issues relating to gender equality and violence against women, "*Sostegno Donna*" (Women's Support) was set up, a direct assistance channel for all female colleagues who

feel the need to talk to selected professionals (social workers, psychologists, experts in cultural mediation, civil and criminal lawyers specialising in women's rights).

Acea is one of Italy's leading multi-utility companies and has always been committed to corporate social responsibility, paying particular attention to all stakeholders, profitability, service quality and sustainable development. Listed on the stock exchange since 1999, it is active in the management and development of networks and services in the water, energy and environment sectors. It is Italy's leading company in the water sector, serving a population of over 9 million, including through holdings in Lazio, Tuscany, Umbria, Campania, Sicily and Liguria. The Group's activities include integrated water services, energy production, electricity sales and distribution, public and artistic lighting, waste disposal and energy recovery.

Chapter 9

STEM: Science needs more girls



Highlights

- Today, women make up only a third of the international scientific community.
- In Italy, 29.1% of boys aged between 11 and 19 think that boys are more talented than girls in science, engineering and technology subjects, compared to 12.9% of girls who think that.
- It is mostly boys who choose STEM subjects, but girls graduate with better grades.

'Fewer scientists means fewer innovations, fewer medical discoveries and less sustainable development. At a time of urgent global challenges (from climate change to health crises to rapid advances in artificial intelligence) the world needs more science... and science needs more women.' On 11 February 2025, at the 10th International Day of Women and Girls in Science, Unesco Director-General Audrey Azoulay⁷⁴ emphasized, not for the first time, the need and urgency to close the gender gap in STEM studies.

⁷⁴ unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392690

The four letters of this acronym stand for four educational and professional fields (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) that are crucial to addressing global challenges and driving innovation. These are all disciplines where, despite the efforts that have been made, the gender gap still remains deep: 'There has been little change over the past decade,' continues Audrey Azoulay, '**and today, women still make up only a third of the international scientific community.** In some countries, fewer than 10% of researchers are women.' This gap has economic implications: female STEM professionals typically earn 85% of their male colleagues' salaries.⁷⁵

What causes this problem?

This inequality has deep roots. Girls' self-confidence when it comes to mathematics and science is negatively influenced by peers, parents and teachers who assert or propagate gender stereotypes and prejudices. 'Research has demonstrated that girls who perceive negative stereotypes from teachers and peers regarding their skill level have worse results in mathematics tests and other STEM fields,' Unesco highlights in *Changing the Equation*.⁷⁶

Fighting gender stereotypes in the family and at school is the first big step in encouraging girls and young women to see their own potential and to be able to choose a study path in line with their interests. A recent survey by Istat⁷⁷ in Italy interviewed boys and girls aged 11 to 19. It shows, in fact, that it is often the adolescents themselves who perpetuate these stereotypes: **21.2% think that 'boys are better at science, engineering and technology subjects than girls.'** There is more prejudice in males than in females (29.1% versus 12.9%).

STEM in Europe and Italy

Europe aligns with the world average of women graduates in STEM subjects: in 2023 (latest available Eurostat data) 33.5% of STEM graduates were women⁷⁸. The gender gap remains noticeable even among those doing a PhD. In fact, although girls make up 48% of PhD students in the European Union⁷⁹, strong disparities persist depending on the field of research: only 21.4% of young women choose the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) sector, less than 30% of PhD students in the subjects of Engineering and Industrial Production are women, and in the fields of Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics, women barely surpass the target of 40%.⁸⁰

In Italy, the gap is narrowing very slowly: according to the Almalaurea consortium⁸¹ from 2019 to 2024, female graduates in STEM disciplines increased from 40.2% to 41.1%. They also have **better results** (104.5 is their average graduation mark, compared to 102.6 for men) and **greater consistency in their studies** (58.1% complete their studies on time, compared to 52.7% of men).

But what happens when these women graduates finally enter the world of work? Five years after the end of their studies, 90.1% found employment, which is slightly lower than the male employment rate of 92%.

However, gender differences emerge when looking at income: **the average net salary for women is EUR 1,798 compared to EUR 2,025 for men.** 'The gender pay gap has, however, been gradually narrowing over time,' Almalaurea points out: in 2019, male STEM graduates received 19% more than female graduates; in 2023 this was 12.6%⁸².

⁷⁵ 'Changing the equation. Securing STEM futures for women', UNESCO, 2025 - bit.ly/47ApjC9

⁷⁶ *Ibid*

⁷⁷ 'Stereotipi sui ruoli di genere: il punto di vista di ragazze e ragazzi' (Stereotypes on gender roles: the views of girls and boys), Istat, 2025 - bit.ly/3Jme8TA

⁷⁸ Eurostat - bit.ly/3HtYaq2

⁷⁹ 'She Figures 2024' - bit.ly/4luos9l

⁸⁰ According to the parameters of the European Commission, gender balance in higher education is when both men and women make up between 40% and 60% of the total. 'She Figures 2024' - bit.ly/4luos9l

⁸¹ 'Profilo dei laureati' (Profile of graduates), Almalaurea 2025 - bit.ly/4lyn7yu and bit.ly/4oHqgPf

⁸² *Ibid*

The AlmaLaurea survey also reveals different expectations with respect to the type of job sought: when looking for a job, **girls aim more for stability** and place more importance on welfare and economic independence.

When a passion becomes a job

Silvia and Nisia are both 26 years old and work at IBM where they are involved in software development and cloud and artificial intelligence solutions. But their story began much earlier, in high school: Silvia was very good at science subjects (*'maths was fun'*) while Nisia was fascinated by the workings of PCs and their many possible uses. This prompted her to attend a technical institute specialising in computer science: only in the last two years of high school did she begin to doubt herself. *'I was tempted to enrol in humanities,'* she says, *'at school you only do small exercises which don't have much real world application, I didn't have an overall vision of how big projects happen.'*

The NERD? (*Non È Roba per Donne?* or, in English, *Is This Not for Women?*) SkillsBuild for Girls project was significant in encouraging her to continue her university studies in ICT. NERD?'s *SkillsBuild for Girls* is a free programme, now in its 13th year. It was developed by IBM for high school girls throughout Italy to make them more familiar with IT. The project is based on IBM's free worldwide training platform *SkillsBuild*, which enables people to improve their digital skills through multiple courses that have been translated into more than 20 languages. They provide certifications that can be included in a student's CV and remain relevant after graduation.

'Being able to follow a project from start to finish gives you a different kind of satisfaction from the exercises you do at school,' says Nisia, who, during the NERD? project worked, together with her classmates, on the construction of a chatbot that helps people learn English.

But it is not only practical experience that makes the difference. Silvia was 16 years old when she participated in the NERD? project: *'It was also a wonderful experience because of the chance to get a glimpse of what goes on inside a company, something you have absolutely no idea about at school: it was so vital for me to understand that that study path could appeal to me,'* she says. *'Hearing the first-hand experiences of so many women working at IBM encouraged me even more.'*

First-hand experience is one of the best tools for combatting the (still widespread) stereotypes of IT being a purely male field of study and work. But perhaps something is changing: during their university career, both Silvia and Nisia were part of a small group of female students within faculties where males were the majority. *'But by the end of the three-year course I could already see that there were a few more girls starting in the first year,'* says Nisia. While Silvia adds, *'I think the situation is changing, even outside university: for example, I come across influencers on social media who talk about science and technology subjects.'*

A further factor that steered Nisia towards choosing this study path was job opportunities: *'Of course, passion is the real driving force,'* she hastens to add. *'But often people who took different educational paths struggle to find a job: in this sector, on the other hand, there are many more opportunities.'*

Silvia and Nisia are two young professionals who have been able to put their potential and talent to use in the ICT field, particularly in the artificial intelligence (AI) sector that plays an increasingly important role in our lives. **Building and training AI systems already requires - and, in the future, will increasingly continue to require - female skills to overcome biases in the datasets that train those systems.**

'To resolve this situation, it will be necessary to make more accurate and representative datasets available to AI,' explains Silvia. *'AI will help us do things better and faster, but it can never replace a person because everything it generates has to be reworked.'* Nisia concludes by reflecting on the need to use artificial intelligence appropriately: *'This is an incredible innovation that can help us in so many ways. But it must be used in an informed way.'*

The leading role girls are playing in the fourth industrial revolution

When Darya Majidi, an Italian-Iranian digital entrepreneur, enrolled at university in the late 1980s, the internet (as we know it today) did not yet exist. *'But I was good at maths and those were the years when computer science was a discipline in its infancy. I was motivated by curiosity, I wanted to understand what it was all about and that's why I chose this study path.'*

It is difficult to summarize Majidi's biography in a few lines. Born in 1968, she graduated in Computer Science with a project on the application of artificial intelligence to support neurologists as her degree thesis, which became the first spin-off created by a woman at the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, her university⁸³. Over the following years, she founded the strategy consulting company Daxo Group, where she is the CEO, and the business incubator Daxolab. She is also president of the association Donne 4.0 (a community founded in 2019 to combat the digital gender gap) and of UN Women Italy, representing the Italian committee of the UN agency for gender equality.

One of the issues close to her heart is empowering girls and young women, as well as the need to bring female students into ICT faculties, where the gender gap is particularly wide: *'The number of female students is not increasing because no one is explaining to them the potential of these courses of study, especially with regard to artificial intelligence. There is also a lack of awareness on the part of parents and teachers that many professions we know today are destined to disappear and that we will need to look elsewhere.'* Precisely in order to help young girls to make a more informed choice about their study path, Majidi launched 'AixGirls' in 2022, a summer camp aimed at equipping high-school girls to play a leading role in the fourth industrial revolution. *'After having had this experience, 86% of the young people enrolled in a STEM or ICT faculty,'* she points out.

Initiatives like this are useful and valuable, but isn't there a risk that in such a fast-paced world the gender gap is already too deep? *'It's not too late, but we must break the trend,'* explains Majidi. *'If girls already attending high school today were given good guidance, they could master the necessary skills within four or five years. We must no longer accept statements like "I don't get maths" from female students.'*

Majidi also emphasizes the importance of bringing computer science into schools as a subject on a par with history or literature. *'So many girls get to the age of 18 without knowing about it, schools have to be open to it, broadening skills. And we need not fear these technologies or artificial intelligence: **the washing machine freed our mothers from tiring and time-consuming work, AI will do the same for us.** Neither should we forget that for a girl to pursue a career in this field also means building solid financial independence.'*

Technology for women, or maybe not

Is there any commonly, or even daily, used technology that has been invented for the purpose of satisfying women's needs or to make women's lives easier?

I pose this question in *Technology of Revolution* (Il Saggiatore, 2024), specifically in a paragraph entitled 'The Space of What Is Possible'. In recounting the histories and social constructions of other technologies designed 'for women' – such as the contraceptive pill, or the dishwasher – I got to thinking about a fundamental issue: how many of the technologies that claim to be built for women's safety or health really do serve their actual needs, and how many merely project onto them needs and solutions defined by others, following a patriarchal and capitalist rationale, and even create new risks?

⁸³ A. Mariani, Darya, the 4.0 entrepreneur on the side of women, *Avvenire*, 22/05/2025 - bit.ly/45CbXCP

Today, there are more and more artificial intelligence (AI) and data analysis tools designed 'for women' that evoke care, safety and empowerment. But by also opening up these technologies to social analysis, we can see violations of privacy, systemic biases, a logic of control and surveillance, and above all **a structural ambiguity as to who defines women's needs and what interests are really put at the centre of these innovations.**

One example is found in **menstrual cycle monitoring apps**, which promise awareness of and attention to one's body where medicine fails, but **actually work according to the logic of data capitalism**: they turn intimate information such as menstrual flow, pain, sexual desire, trying to conceive and mood into data points to be analyzed, recorded and transferred. In 2024, the three most popular apps exceeded 250 million global downloads. Yet, they operate in opaque environments and share information with actors such as Meta, Google and governments. In the US and the UK, data from these apps have been used in abortion-related trials.

Another example is software created to support the prevention of gender-based violence, such as Viogen, which the Spanish government adopted to predict recidivism. An algorithm generates a risk score from a questionnaire that a police officer fills in as the woman files a complaint. In 2024, 14 out of 15 femicides occurred after complaints were classified as 'low risk'. More than 95% of officers follow the algorithm's verdict without questioning it.

In both cases, **the problem is the absence of listening**: the needs of non-male perspectives are not recognized as being varied but are predefined, reduced to variables to be pigeonholed into a model. Whether preventing an unwanted pregnancy or predicted abuse, **algorithms are no substitute where relationships, resources and human responsibility are absent.** But the 'space of what is possible' can still be built, because none of this is inevitable: we need participatory planning and structural approaches that put identities and real social impact at the centre of technology.

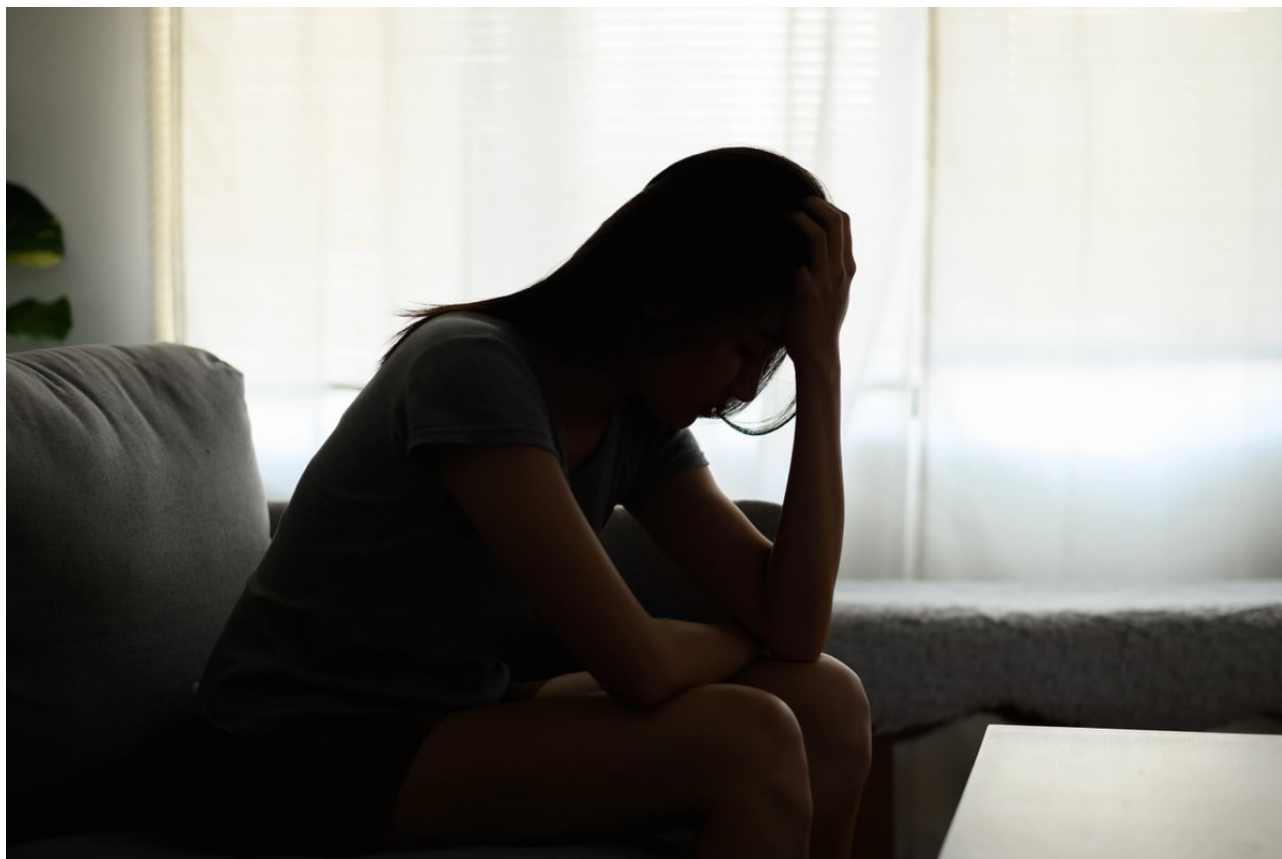
Diletta Huyskes, co-CEO & co-founder Immanence

GOOD TO KNOW!

- From 2019 to 2024, in Italy female graduates in STEM disciplines increased from 40.2% to 41.1%, with the gender gap in this area narrowing – albeit slowly.

Chapter 10

Online Abuse, toxic misogynist subcultures and their effect on girls



Highlights

- 58% of girls aged 14-16 have experienced online harassment, according to UNESCO.
- The Internet Watch Foundation has reported 291,270 web pages for containing pornographic images of children. Nearly all of them featured girls.
- In Italy, 68% of online grooming targets girls.

Today, children are growing up in an increasingly digitalized society. This has a profound effect on their development, the way they study, their relationships and their mental health.

Early digital use is now the norm. The OECD report '*How's Life for Children in the Digital Age?*'⁸⁴ stated that in 2021, **93% of 10-year-olds in OECD countries had access to the internet** (up from 85% in 2011) **and 70% already owned a smartphone.**

Among teenagers, the numbers are even higher: in 2022, 95% of 15-year-olds had access to a PC or tablet; 98% had a smartphone with an internet connection. In Italy, ISTAT⁸⁵ highlighted that in 2024, 99% of families with minors had internet access.

These data show no differences between the genders; however the global data provide a different outlook: in lower-middle income countries, 90% of girls and young women (aged 15-24) do not have access to the internet, compared to 78% of their male peers. We find the widest gap in South Asia: teenage boys and

⁸⁴ "How's Life for Children in the Digital Age?", OECD, 2025 - bit.ly/4p6v8xl

⁸⁵ ISTAT - bit.ly/4mWykK6

young men have a 7-percentage-point lead over adolescent girls and young women.⁸⁶

This situation can have significant consequences: “*Limited access*,” UNICEF reports, “*restricts girls’ and young women’s opportunity to access education, employment and other essential services critical for their well-being.*”⁸⁷

This gap needs to be bridged, but it is also important to approach girls’ and boys’ (but also adults’) internet use with increasing awareness of the negative impacts it can have on the mental health of minors and their relationships with others, as well as of the risks of being exposed to the most insidious forms of online abuse. However, it is also necessary to change the current rules, increasing the age at which access to electronic devices and social networks is permitted and making regulations for the protection of minors online more stringent.

In fact, OECD research⁸⁸ revealed that in 2021-2022, 10% of adolescents aged 11, 13 and 15 reported having “*a problematic relationship*” with social media: that percentage rises to 12% when looking only at girls of those ages. 36% of 15-year-olds reported feeling upset after encountering online content inappropriate for their age; 42% were upset by offensive messages they received; almost 40% felt uncomfortable that information about them had been shared online without their consent. “***In almost all OECD countries, girls report such experiences substantially more frequently than boys,***” the report reads.

Italy-specific data can be found in the latest **indifesa Observatory**, run by Terre des Hommes in partnership with *Scomodo*. In 2025, the Observatory gathered responses from more than 2,700 young people under the age of 26.

The research shows Italian teenagers are aware of the risks associated with the web: specifically, 58% of **girls flagged revenge porn (sharing of intimate images without consent) as the main threat**. This is followed by fear of becoming distanced from real life (47.6%), online harassment (46%) and cyberbullying (44%). Boys also show awareness of these risks, but at lower rates. 90% of the girls interviewed said they are aware of the risks associated with sharing photos and videos online, compared to 76% of boys.

Fighting algorithmic bias to empower girls

The female body is everywhere in our incessant feeds: clips go viral, poses are repeated, aesthetic filters are applied. And yet, the overexposure we see in social media isn’t replicated in places where there is real influence, where decision-making actually takes place.

As of June 2025, the UN Women Data Hub reported that only 22.9% of ministers (less than one in four), 27.2% of MPs (just over one in four) and 35.5% of local councillors (still below the 40% threshold recommended by the EU) were women. Meanwhile, **15-year-old girls spend up to 43% more time on social media** than their male peers, immersed in an often-stereotyped self-image.

“Sora”, an AI text-to-video model, takes a simple description (“*a leader speaking*”) and, in just a few moments, transforms it into a biased video clip. Trained on billions of frames taken from the web, Sora absorbs and reproduces the cultural prejudices of those who program and feed it.

In the 2024 paper *Gender Bias in Text-to-Video Generation Models: A case study of Sora*, researchers from Aligarh Muslim University, VIT Bhopal University, Nanyang Technological University, Technical University of Munich, Imperial College London and Edinburgh Napier University analyzed 120 videos generated from neutral prompts. They found that 85% portray women in sexualized poses, assign leadership roles almost exclusively to men and totally ignore scenarios involving caregiving or women’s daily lives.

⁸⁶ “Bridging the Gender Digital Divide” *UNICEF*, 2023 - bit.ly/4oWBLTe

⁸⁷ *Ibid*

⁸⁸ “How’s Life for Children in the Digital Age?”, *OECD*, 2025 - bit.ly/4p6v8xl

That then leads us to talk about '**algorithmic violence**': automated systems that, through 'black box' systems – where there is no transparency or democratic control – reproduce gender stereotypes, deprive users of context and freedom of choice, and amplify harmful narratives.

In a comparison with ChatGPT, four main mechanisms were explored:

- **Automatic sexualization**, even when no one has explicitly requested it;
- **Reduction to pure appearance**, where the body is only a visual surface, devoid of history;
- **Enhanced sensationalism**, pushing anything that drives clicks and emotional reactions to the top;
- **Opaque rules** of moderation and recommendation, decided by a few technocrats.

The 2023 Unesco report '*Your Opinion Doesn't Matter, Anyway: Exposing Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in an Era of Generative AI*' defines '**technology-facilitated gender-based violence**' as any digital abuse that causes physical, psychological, social or political harm to women for being women⁸⁹. Unesco documents that 58% of girls aged 14-16 have experienced online harassment and that 60% have experienced at least one episode of stalking, hate speech, doxing or video-abuse.

Action must be taken on several fronts if we are to render realistic representations visible digitally. In its *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence* (2021), Unesco advocates the strengthening of media and information literacy, adoption of ethical guidelines for AI and introduction of governance standards for platforms.

The May 2023 *Manifesto for the protection of children's rights in a digital environment* by Italy's *Garante per l'Infanzia e l'Adolescenza* (Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents) underlines the need for structured media education programmes for girls under 18, so that they understand and, consequently, can navigate systems that run on algorithms.

The Bill of Rights in the Age of Digital and Artificial Intelligence (DiCultHer, rev. 20.XI.24) establishes the right of citizens to express their identity, not be defined or profiled solely by an algorithm and maintain control over the way in which they are represented on digital platforms.

Protecting girls' bodies does not mean removing them from the screen, but giving them back their power of choice: to no longer be objects for consumption, but people who can find their own way, and can understand and act, online and onlife.

In conclusion, through art we can find the key to breaking this pattern: as in Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974), it takes decisive action to break passivity, define boundaries and claim our sovereignty in the real and digital world.

Lucia Abbinante, Expert in Youth Policy & Organizational Innovation. Vice President of Kreact, former ANG (Italian National Youth Agency) Director.

Minidictionary

Stalking: repeated persecutory behavior by the persecutor (stalker) toward their victim, causing psychological and physical distress and a reasonable sense of fear.

Hate speech: any expression (written or spoken) that spreads, incites, promotes or attempts to excuse hatred or intolerance against vulnerable individuals and minority groups, involving abuse, harassment, nicknames, prejudices, stereotypes and insults that stigmatize and offend.

⁸⁹ In July 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Council officially adopted a resolution formally recognising "technology-facilitated gender-based violence" as gender-based violence, committing States to prevent it.

Doxing: a practice that includes publicly sharing a person's private and sensitive information online, without their consent.

Video-abuse: use of videos to perpetrate abuse, violence, or harass or exploit a victim.

Online child pornography: real and fake abuse are both on the rise

The new report⁹⁰ by the *Internet Watch Foundation* (IWF), a nonprofit organization that works internationally in partnership with governments and law enforcement agencies to analyze and remove child pornography images from the web, offers us a cross-section that is disturbing to say the least.

In 2024, the IWF discovered images or videos of sexually abused children, or links to such content, on 291,270 web pages. That's an increase of 5% compared to the previous year.

- 94% involved child pornographic images of girls.
- 91% of the images were 'self-generated', i.e. taken by the minors themselves with smartphones or webcams, after being groomed, deceived or blackmailed.
- 29% of the images were classified as category A, the most extreme (rape, sadism or even zoophilia).
- 62% of the images were taken in an EU country, with the majority taken in the Netherlands, followed by Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania and Poland. 14% were in the USA.

In Italy, the Postal and Communication Police⁹¹ analysed 42,231 sites in 2024, of which 2,775 were blacklisted because they contained images of sexual exploitation of minors, blocking them to prevent them being shared.

The number of cases handled rose from 2,702 in 2023 to **2,828 in 2024**. Last year 147 people were arrested. **374 of those cases** involved **online grooming**, **68% of which concerned girls**. The numbers in relation to sextortion and revenge porn were lower – 130 and 42 respectively.

The development of tools that can create images using generative artificial intelligence pose a further problem when it comes to protecting minors from online child pornography. **In 2024, the IWF recorded a 380% increase in child pornographic images of this type compared to 2023.** Significant improvement in how realistic AI-generated images are inevitably makes it harder to identify and protect victims, with the added risk of using up resources to investigate artificially generated images rather than cases involving 'real' girls and boys.

But even here the boundaries are not always clear. An analyst from the *Internet Watch Foundation* described to the BBC⁹² the case of a female child abuse victim, whose images began to circulate in 2021. Subsequent investigations led to the capture of the person responsible for the abuse and most of the images were deleted. But the Foundation recently discovered new child pornography images of the child were being shared. Those images had been generated with the help of AI, depicting an even more serious type of abuse. "This is as far from a victimless crime as it gets – there's a very real victim here and I think real harm is being done by this content," the analyst added.

In this area, as early as 2024, Terre des Hommes asked to make it punishable by law to share sexually explicit images generated with artificial intelligence without consent.⁹³ This was one of four proposed

⁹⁰ *Internet Watch Foundation*, 2025 - bit.ly/41lrjMc

⁹¹ 'Internet, Tante storie da raccontare insieme...' (Internet, So Many Stories to Tell Together...), Italian Postal Police, 2025 - bit.ly/4Onu2qx

⁹² "AI puts real child sex victims at risk, experts say", *BBC*, 18 June 2025, bit.ly/41woy1l

⁹³ *Terre des Hommes*, 2024 - bit.ly/41UuiKh

regulatory reforms aimed at ensuring victims of online violence – especially minors – are adequately protected.

Some changes to the regulatory framework of criminal cases in this area are included in the Bill of 20 March 2025 no. 1146/24 containing provisions and delegation to the government of secondary legislation regarding artificial intelligence. The bill is currently passing through Parliament⁹⁴.

The internet of ‘men’ and ‘the real women’

In recent years (and particularly since the release of the TV series *Adolescence*), talk of the ‘*manosphere*’ has reached mainstream media. This umbrella term includes the broad network of accounts on social networks, YouTube channels, forums and sites that support and propagate anti-feminist, misogynistic and often ultraconservative views.

The *manosphere* is a world populated by different digital communities, where issues related to masculinity are discussed, often in a resentful and vindictive tone. For example, there are groups that defend men's rights (among other things, they criticize any rules that they deem too unbalanced in favour of women, such as those on divorce), groups of men who have renounced any future relationship with the opposite sex (*men going their own way*) and *incels* (abbreviation of ‘*involuntary celibates*’).

However, it would be a mistake to view incel as just another of the many subcultures that exist exclusively online. The *Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats* (CREST), a British research body that specializes in the study of security threats such as radicalization, extremism and terrorism, drew up a report focusing on this phenomenon. It arrived at a decidedly worrying conclusion: “***The incel ideology has all the typical characteristics of an extremist ideology,***”⁹⁵ including a shared world view and having invented an enemy: women and a society that belittles men. The harmful and violent manner of expression associated with the *incel* world can result in self-harm, abuse of others (such as cyberstalking) and even group acts of violence or abuse.

In contrast to feminist ideals, there is also the ‘*womanosphere*’, a community that includes famous female figures such as American YouTubers Brett Cooper and Candace Owens, but also media that advocates conservative views on what women should be and how they should act. With close ties to the world of MAGA (*Make America Great Again*), the *womanosphere* is nostalgic for traditional femininity, where a woman serves the man she marries; motherhood is her natural life ambition, and she willingly gives up her career to dedicate herself to family life.

Who are the incels?

Jamie calls himself ugly and claims “*to have to trick girls into liking him*”.

He talks about the ‘80/20 theory’, according to which 80% of women want only 20% of men – the most handsome and charismatic ones – leaving everyone else by the wayside, doomed to remain virgins.

Jamie is Jamie Miller. He is 13 years old, a character in the British television miniseries *Adolescence* which has been talked about a lot since it came out in 2025 after it raised the issue of male radicalization online. It showed how the *incel* subculture and *manosphere* can negatively influence young people, leading to misogynistic and violent behaviour. Jamie is in a secure training centre, accused of killing a female peer. These excerpts come from a dialogue with his psychologist.

⁹⁴ The text was written at the end of August 2025.

⁹⁵ *Incels and the Incelosphere: An overview of current research and understanding*, CREST, 2023 - bit.ly/3JuE4wu

The term 'incel', a portmanteau of 'involuntary celibate', defines men and boys who declare themselves victims of a system that they believe, due to female emancipation, denies them access to what they consider a right: a sexual or romantic relationship. In the *incel* and *Red Pill* groups,⁹⁶ this victimism is intertwined with hate speech, dehumanization and incitement to violence.

Who are they and what data is there to show us how great a reach this phenomenon has? A survey carried out by a United States and United Kingdom partnership⁹⁷ issued an online questionnaire to 561 men who defined themselves as 'incels'.

The average age of the interviewees was 29. The majority were white (92%). Almost all of them were straight (92.7%), childless, and many were still living with their parents (49%). 17.8% were unemployed, 55.1% were employed and 27.1% were students. Often they suffered from severe depression and anxiety. 1 in 5 said they think about suicide every day.

As for socio-economic status, 41% were middle class, 27% lower-middle class, 15% lower class, 15% upper-middle or upper class.

A study⁹⁸ of Italian online groups showed that their language revolves around so-called 'LSM' (*Look, Status, Money*), a system where men and women are classified and evaluated as objects, given a score from 0-10 for their aesthetic attributes, economic status and wealth.

Another study⁹⁹ found that the Italian manosphere is less extreme than the manosphere in English-speaking cultures, which is more deeply rooted in conservative rhetoric about family life and '*fathers' rights*'. But even in Italy it is a powerful vehicle for normalizing sexism and hostility towards policies on gender equality.

Donata Columbro, Journalist and data humanizer

GOOD TO KNOW!

- According to the **indifesa** Observatory, 90% of the girls interviewed said they are aware of the risks associated with sharing photos and videos online, compared to 76% of boys.

⁹⁶ Deriving from the movie *The Matrix* (1999), the expression 'take the red pill' among incel communities and throughout the manosphere means awakening from the alleged brainwashing taking place in our society and realising that feminism is misandry that, rather than striving for women's equality, subjugates men.

⁹⁷ Predicting harm among incels (involuntary celibates): the roles of mental health, ideological belief and social networking', 2024 - bit.ly/4ICLzyB

⁹⁸ Dordoni, Annalisa, and Sveva Magaraggia. 'Models of masculinity in incel and Red Pill online groups: *narrative of self-victimization, dehumanization and violence against women*'. *AG About Gender-International Journal of Gender Studies* 10.19 (2021).

⁹⁹ Ignazzi, Elisa, Mara Maretti, and Lara Fontanella. 'The Italian Manosphere: Composition, Structure, and Functions of a Digital Network', *Social Inclusion* 13 (2025).

Chapter 11

Gender-based Violence: alarming data on the risks for girls



Photo: Francesco Cabras

Highlights

- 67% of the deaths in the Gaza conflict have been girls or women.
- 24% of teenage girls aged 15 to 19 who are in a relationship or are child brides have been victims of physical or sexual violence at the hands of their partner.
- In Italy in 2024, 63% of crimes where minors were the victims were girls. For crimes of sexual violence this figure is as high as 88%.

In 2023, more than 170 conflicts were recorded worldwide. From Myanmar to Sudan, from Ukraine to the Democratic Republic of Congo, girls and women are increasingly being affected by weapon-led violence: an estimated 612 million live in areas affected by combat: "Which represents an increase of around 50% compared to a decade ago," UN Women emphasises¹⁰⁰.

The spread of conflicts has also led to an increase in the number of civilian victims: 33,443 deaths were recorded by the United Nations during 2023¹⁰¹. "The proportion of women and children killed has doubled and

¹⁰⁰ UNWomen - bit.ly/4p0U6OP

¹⁰¹ UN Secretary-General's report 'Protection of civilians in armed conflicts', May 2024 - bit.ly/4g2RCLC

tripled respectively, since 2022," states the report. "In 2023, out of every 10 civilians killed in a conflict, four were women and three were children"¹⁰².

Equally dramatic is the spiral of sexual violence committed in conflict situations: the United Nations recorded a **35% increase in the number of girls raped** from 2022 to 2023¹⁰³.

In the Gaza Strip alone, more than 38,000 girls and women lost their lives between October 2023 and July 2025 due to Israeli army bombardment or untreated illness. The condemnation comes from the UN Special Rapporteur on Gender-based Violence, Reem Alsalem, in a report which estimates that: "67% of victims of the ongoing conflict in Gaza are female"¹⁰⁴.

Girls and women in the Strip are not just risking their lives because of the bombing. Gender-based violence has risen: due to repeated displacement, lack of security and the breakdown of social structures, girls and women are increasingly exposed to domestic violence, sexual abuse and early marriage. In April this year, UNFPA confirmed that it had been forced to close three shelters for women and girls due to the bombing, and the remaining 14 centres are open, but with severely limited operations¹⁰⁵.

Girls are particularly vulnerable to assault, harassment and sexual exploitation, particularly when they stay in overcrowded shelters where there is a lack of privacy and adequate sanitation. It is also important to highlight the further marginalisation suffered by girls and women with disabilities, who are even more at risk of being subjected to gender-based violence¹⁰⁶.

Between December 24 and March 25, UNFPA found that almost 40% of the reported incidents of gender-based violence involved underage girls and young women, and most of these incidents, 29%, involved girls under the age of 11¹⁰⁷.

Given the extremely dangerous context, collecting and analysing this data is very difficult: the victims themselves tend to downplay such violence, as, on a daily basis, they have to face bombings, loss of family and loved ones, and a lack of food and water, while humanitarian worker fieldwork is severely hampered. It is important to remember that gender-based violence, even in the context of conflict, generates traumatic short and long-term consequences that will leave indelible marks in the lives of these people.

Girls and women "continue to pay the price of the wars of men," commented Sima Bahous, Executive Director of UN Women¹⁰⁸. **"This is happening in the context of a larger war on women. The deliberate targeting of women's rights is not unique to conflict-affected countries but is even more lethal in those settings"**.

The situation is particularly dramatic in **Sudan**: in the first five months of 2025 alone, at least **330 cases of sexual violence** were documented (however, the number is likely to be an underestimate). A group of independent UN experts denounced¹⁰⁹ widespread and systematic violence against women and girls such as gang rape and sexual violence, often in front of family members, mainly by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). "Sexual violence has become as widespread a weapon as guns and bullets," said a nurse working in a UNFPA clinic in the country¹¹⁰. "Women arrive at our facilities exhausted, traumatised, often after months of displacement. They carry with them physical and emotional wounds that are difficult to comprehend".

¹⁰² *Ibid*

¹⁰³ UNWomen - bit.ly/4p0U6OP

¹⁰⁴ OHCHR, 2025 - bit.ly/4IZSeTV

¹⁰⁵ UNFPA, 2025 - bit.ly/3VsDH0J

¹⁰⁶ UNFPA, 2025 - [/bit.ly/45Zap69](https://bit.ly/45Zap69)

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁸ *The Guardian*, 23 October 2024 - bit.ly/4g3mMCD

¹⁰⁹ OHCHR, 2025 - bit.ly/4nbaL0t

¹¹⁰ UNFPA, 2025 - bit.ly/424Ux0F

The use of rape as a weapon of war by armies or other armed groups has also been documented in other 'forgotten' conflicts, such as the ongoing conflict in the Kivu region of the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, where health workers have been reporting an increase in cases of sexual violence against women and girls for at least three years, with a further spike in the first months of 2025¹¹¹. While in Tigray - a region in **northern Ethiopia** - mass rapes, forced pregnancies and systematic violence committed by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers against Tigrayan women and girls with the explicit aim of 'erasing' the presence of this ethnic group from the region have been documented. Interviewed by the *Guardian*¹¹², a psychologist recounted the story of a girl whose arm had been broken during a rape in an attempt by the soldiers to remove her subcutaneous contraceptive device to force her to become pregnant and give birth to a child of the same ethnicity as her rapists.

indifesa stories

Let us not forget Fatima



On 16 April 2025, some extremely sad news reached us: at the age of just 24, **Fatima Hassouna** - a talented Palestinian photojournalist and *Youth Advocate* of the *She Leads* movement - was killed in an Israeli airstrike, along with ten members of her family. Her death represents a profound loss not only for her community, but for the entire world.

For 18 months, Fatima lived through the relentless devastation in Gaza, documenting the human cost of the conflict with courage, unwavering honesty and deep empathy. Her camera, which she called *Anya*, became her companion and witness, bearing witness to the incredible resilience of her people and the stark reality of war.

Fatima's work was more than just documentation. **She wanted everyone to know what they were experiencing in Gaza and to demand an end to the conflict.**

¹¹¹ *Reliefweb*, 12 June 2025 - bit.ly/4g2Sz6X c

¹¹² *The Guardian*, 31 July 2025 - bit.ly/47ouzsk

Her activism gave a voice to those who had been silenced. And her words, like her photographs, remain a legacy of her spirit. We are convinced that Fatima must not be forgotten and we are honoured to share one of her touching poems.

A Resonant Death

Edited and translated by Batool Abu Akleen

For 300 days, I was accompanied by Anya—my camera, and my only good friend who knew how to catch things, how to take the photos I wanted.

For 300 days, my brothers and I were being killed in this massacre.

Blood has been flowing over the ground, and I've become afraid of the moment when my brothers' blood will reach me, will stain me.

For 300 days, we've been seeing only black and red, smelling the scent of death, eating bitter apples, touching only corpses.

It's the first time I have experienced such a massive loss.

I have lost 11 members of my family, the dearest to my heart.

Still, nothing can stop me.

I roam the streets every day without any master plan.

I just want the world to see what I see.

I am taking photos to archive this period of my life.

I am taking photos of this history which my sons might hear of, or might not.

We, we're dying here every day in many colors and shapes.

I die a thousand times when I see a child suffer; I splinter, I turn into ashes.

It hurts me, what we've become.

This nonsense hurts me, and this monster that eats us every day: it hurts.

Every day when I leave, I see my mother waving goodbye, but I don't turn around.

I don't want to see those eyes.

I don't want all this sorrow for my mother, but what is there in this city?

It is only death.

On mentioning death, the inevitable death:

If I must die, I want a resonant death.

I want to be neither a newsflash, nor a number within a group.

I want a death heard by the whole world,

an impact imprinted forever,

and everlasting photos that won't be buried by time or place.

A prevalent phenomenon even outside of conflict

Gender-based violence does not only occur in countries affected by conflict. On the contrary, it is one of the most pervasive forms of human rights violations and mainly affects women and girls. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates in its 2024 report that 24% of adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 who are in a relationship or are child brides have been victims of physical or sexual violence at the hands of their partner¹¹³. A phenomenon that 'is starting alarmingly early for millions of young women around the world', reports Dr Pascale Allotey, Director of WHO's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Research Department.

¹¹³ 'Adolescent girls face alarming rates of intimate partner violence', WHO, 2024 - bit.ly/46ibtDq

Although this is a globally widespread phenomenon, the WHO study shows that the most affected regions are Oceania (where the incidence has risen to 47%) and sub-Saharan Africa (40%), while the lowest rates are in Central Europe (10%) and Central Asia (11%).

The study finds that "Intimate partner violence against adolescent girls is most common in lower-income countries and regions, in places where there are fewer girls in secondary school, and where girls have weaker legal property ownership and inheritance rights compared to men". It shows how child marriage significantly increases the risks due to the age difference between spouses, which leads to "power imbalance, economic dependency and social isolation, all of which increase the likelihood of abuse"¹¹⁴.

An alternative university. Grassroots action in the fight against gender-based violence

In the contemporary landscape of the fight against gender-based violence, the crucial role that grassroots action plays as a driver of social and cultural transformation is becoming increasingly clear.

"The impetus arose from the various reports that we, of Sinistra Universitaria, have received over time. When we decided to launch the questionnaire, the shocking news had just been released about the rape of a girl at the Polyclinic who had been raped while doing an internship'. These are the words of Valeria Cigliana, Academic Senator of the student association Sinistra Universitaria at Sapienza University and promoter of the campaign against gender-based violence in the university that led to the report 'An alternative university. The Manifesto for a Trans Feminist University'.

The questionnaire Cigliana referred to was the foundation of an investigation conducted within Sapienza University, Rome, between November 2023 and March 2024, which collected more than 1,300 responses in total from students who experience the university environment on a daily basis.

The data emerging from the survey - which included 15.6% of respondents (160 people) who have experienced harassment and 18.2% discrimination within the university environment, with clear discrepancies between men and women - are a prime example of how **new generations are reflecting demands and discrepancies experienced first-hand, which the institution in question often fails to recognise.**

This participatory process is not just a social research project, but represents a political act of re-appropriation of educational spaces by those who use them on a daily basis.

This experience highlights the broader dynamics that characterise the activism among younger people in the fight against gender-based violence: the strength of student activism, in this case, lies first and foremost in its ability to identify a real problem among the student population and break through the wall of silence that often shrouds experiences of violence and discrimination in academic environments.

There is a clear need for institutions that wish to ensure safety and combat gender-based violence in the younger population, to engage in dialogue with those who experience this discrimination on a daily basis and who often notice problems before they become more widely visible.

Cecilia Pellizzari, Editorial Director of Scomodo

Crimes against children in Italy, gender plays a significant role

Fourteen years later - so much has happened since the **indifesa** Campaign was born - but the trends have not been inverted. The prolonged wave of violence against girls and boys continues to manifest itself in figures we have to face up to and not ignore.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*

In the meantime, **we have reached a negative milestone in the latest figures for these crimes. For the first time since our monitoring started, crimes against children recorded by the Criminal Analysis Service of the Criminal Police Central Directorate exceeded 7,000 victims, reaching 7,204, a 4% increase on what was already a record figure in 2023.** No words can brush aside this hideously conspicuous figure, which represents a 35% increase over ten years. Yet again, **gender emerges as a significant factor: 63% of victims are girls.** In relative and absolute terms, this figure continues to grow.

Gender: a situation without improvement

Gender disproportion is most evident in sexual offences, with highs of 88% for the crime of sexual assault, 86% for aggravated sexual assault and 85% for sexual acts with children.

The trends involved in this data are interesting:

- For the first time, crimes of sexual violence have not increased, but with 912 victims this still constitutes the most common type of sexual offence;
- Cases of aggravated sexual assault rose by just 1%, but over a ten-year period they saw the most marked increase, rising by 75%;
- Instead, sexual acts with children under 14 years saw a 15% increase in one year and 16% over a ten-year period.
- Digital-related offences, possession of pornographic material and child pornography, have also risen year on year, up +36% and +63% respectively, confirming a clear prevalence of female victims and the growing sense that the internet is becoming an increasingly unsafe place for our sons and daughters;
- In contrast, the figure for child prostitution showed a downward trend, falling by 7% in one year and 64% in ten years and, above all, reaching complete parity between males and females for the first time. This data certainly warrants further investigation. While on the one hand it appears to confirm a long-term trend, resulting from changes in lifestyle and greater capacity for reporting and punishment, on the other hand it could also conceal a dangerous '*normalisation*' of the phenomenon.

Danger is most often found at home

One statistic in particular spotlights the social crisis we are experiencing which we will never tire of highlighting. **Crimes within the family remain the most common.**

In 2024, close to 3,000 children were victims of domestic abuse - the exact figure is 2,975 - and **this is an increase of 5% on the annual figure and a staggering increase by 101% (or doubled), over a ten-year period**, confirming what has already emerged from the research¹¹⁵ on the child abuse that we conducted, together with CISMAI, for the National Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents. Here too, the majority of victims are female (53%), a sign that, while it is true that domestic violence against children has no gender (unlike violence between adults), **the severity of abuse is beginning to show a clear gender bias.**

The last piece of data to report are the statistics relating to premeditated murder. This phenomenon has been steadily decreasing (down 38% in ten years) consistent with the steady decline in murders in our country. However, between 2023 and 2024, for the first time there was a significant increase with the number of victims rising from 12 to 21, an increase of 75%. The absolute numbers remain very small in relation to the others, but the phenomenon clearly requires further investigation. Incidentally, this is one of the very few offences that has an obvious male predominance with 76% of the cases involving boys.

¹¹⁵ Terre des Hommes, 2025 - <http://bit.ly/41yJzjU>

Reportings vs 'grey area': more visible, but not necessarily fewer

Several reports indicate that such figures are also the result of a greater visibility of the crimes being monitored, alongside the greater propensity on the part of the victims and their relatives or next of kin to report incidents due to changing social attitudes, an increase in awareness-raising campaigns, and the growing expertise of law enforcement agencies responsible for managing reporting and dealing with criminal activity. Please note that this should not lead us to believe that the infamous grey area, the number of cases that remain unreported, is necessarily lower than before.

Unfortunately, **there are signs of a greater fragility in the society**, a loosening of moral constraints to the point of breaking related social taboos, and a growing resurgence of patriarchal culture which, far from being definitively wiped out in this country, appears to be dangerously re-appropriating spaces of '*social legitimacy*' that can also be breeding grounds for gender-based violence and violence against children.

We do not want to repeat this message again and again like a broken record. **The figures clearly show that we cannot stand by and watch**, and that we need swift, concerted and integrated action coordinated in both the cultural and regulatory aspects, to combat violence and gender-based violence. The people who are principally asking for this action are the victims of this wave of violence that threatens increasingly to become an epidemic.

3 concrete actions to take now

What should our reaction be to these figures?

1. **We must make urgent and competent interventions in our schools and in our communities:** education on sexuality, emotional awareness and consent can no longer be entrusted solely to the goodwill of teachers and to sporadic resources, but must become part of the Italian school curriculum; training must focus on peer education, and we must raise the bar, with monitored actions that help us define intervention processes based on evidence of short-, medium- and long-term effectiveness. The media (both traditional media and online and social platforms) must also play a decisive role, as well as the places where the educational community gathers, such as associations and sports clubs, and youth centres.
2. **We must help families and strengthen services:** the family cannot be touted as deserving of help only ahead of every election. We need to strengthen support for families, enhance local social services and counselling centres, create integrated teams from institutions, services, schools, health and the third sector, and to define intervention protocols to support victims of violence and also perpetrators of violent acts.
3. **We need clearer rules to protect digital security and effective services to create safe digital spaces:** politics cannot entrust everything to self-regulation by private enterprises. Digital crime is on the rise and children feel less and less safe and secure. We must urgently intervene in the regulatory system, raising the age of access to electronic devices and social media platforms (with penalties for both companies and family members) and defining clear protocols for identifying online perpetrators of criminal behaviour and for reporting/removing unlawful online content. However, we must also strengthen specialised victim support helplines and services for intercepting risk-taking behaviour, and we need to increase our efforts to promote digital literacy not only of children, but also of adults.



From 2012 to today, 14 years of **indifesa Campaign to **defend** young girls and female teenagers**

Child brides, underage mothers, domestic slaves, victims of genital mutilation, sex trafficking, daily violence, discrimination and school dropouts: this is the horrific fate that millions of girls around the world are still forced to endure today.

To say NEVER AGAIN to all this, in 2012 – on the occasion of the First International Day of the Girl Child – Indifesa was born.

In 14 years, our campaign has transformed the commitment and generosity of many people into concrete actions in Italy and in various countries around the world, including Bangladesh, India, Iraq, Zimbabwe, Peru and Mozambique. Here we have provided protection, care and education to tens of thousands of girls and young women.

Research, events and awareness-raising initiatives have enabled us to mobilise institutions, schools, influencers, public figures, the media and citizens, earning us important recognition, first and foremost the Medal of the Italian Presidency of the Republic.

It is not easy to remember them all, but here we will try to make a non-exhaustive list of what we have achieved over the past 14 years.

Research and publications

The **indifesa** Dossier is now the benchmark for institutions, media and associations on the condition of girls and young women around the world. We have also carried out two important, unique and pioneering studies in this field:

- **Cronache Bambine** (Girls' News), which in 2012, thanks to collaboration with ANSA, analysed crime news, revealing the shocking average of six news items per day on abuse and violence against minors.

- the **first comparative study on legislation tackling violence against girls and women**, presented in 2012 to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and subsequently to the UN, carried out with the law firm Paul Hastings.

Furthermore, since 2015, the **indifesa blog** has been collecting news and stories of hope and change from communities that are experimenting with original ways of responding to gender-based violence and discrimination.

Listening to the voices of young people

The active involvement of young people is an integral part of Terre des Hommes' mission and, from the outset, the **indifesa** campaign has given centre stage to the voices of adolescents.

The first initiative in this direction was *Di Pari Passo*, launched in 2013 together with Soccorso Rosa/Ospedale San Carlo in Milan: a series of meetings, accompanied by a questionnaire, in lower secondary schools to raise awareness among students, teachers and parents about gender discrimination. This initiative led to the creation, with the support of the Department for Equal Opportunities, of the first manual for secondary schools against gender-based violence, published by Settenove.

Since then, our commitment has never wavered. In 2014, together with ScuolaZoo, we created the Observatory **indifesa**: an annual survey that has so far involved over 72,000 teenagers from all over Italy, collecting data on their experiences and perceptions of gender-based violence and discrimination, bullying, cyberbullying and online violence.

In 2018, the **indifesa** Network was also launched, the first Italian network of school and youth web radio stations against discrimination. Today, in six different Italian regions, there are groups of young people who are getting involved as ambassadors for change.

Through training courses and discussions, the young participants explore the content of the **indifesa** campaign and rework it into podcasts and radio content designed to engage with their peers. It is an experience that combines education on rights, critical thinking and digital skills, offering young people a real space for expression, participation and active citizenship.

Activism and participation

Over the years, 11 October has also become a regular event for several Italian cities, which have joined the campaign by symbolically dressing their buildings in orange to say NO to gender-based violence and discrimination. Since 2017, more than 100 municipalities and local authorities have signed the Manifesto **indifesa** for an Italy more girls' friendly. These are the commitments required:

- adopt a Charter for the promotion of the rights of girls and young women on which to base municipal policies aimed at preventing gender-based violence and discrimination;
- promoting the collection of data on these issues and mapping all the projects offered by the territories;
- promoting an Awareness and Training Plan among children and adolescents on the prevention of gender-based violence and discrimination, bullying and cyberbullying;

In June 2020, with #unastatuaperlebambine (a statue for girls), we launched a petition asking the Mayor of Milan, Beppe Sala, to dedicate a statue to all girls and young women who have been victims of violence. The initiative sparked a cultural and institutional mobilisation that led to various symbolic and artistic actions, such as the DiscovHERy billboard installation and the Scolpite photography exhibition, organised in collaboration with the Italian Association of Women Photographers at Palazzo Reale, Milan. Thanks also to this initiative, in 2021 Milan inaugurated its first two statues dedicated to female figures: the revolutionary princess Cristina Trivulzio di Belgioioso and the astrophysicist Margherita Hack.

Our voice and the themes of the campaign have also reached important stages and international forums. On 18 October 2020, the Director General of Terre des Hommes, Paolo Ferrara, participated in TEDx

Reggio Emilia with a talk entitled “*Girls will change the world*” to share with the audience the stories of rebellious girls and young women who have fought and continue to fight to overturn prejudices, effectively changing the world.

In July 2021, Federica Giannotta, Head of Advocacy and Programmes for Italy at Terre des Hommes, spoke at the Young Girls' Voice event during the Women20 summit, presenting institutions with a number of recommendations for working towards gender equality in practical terms.

The *indifesa* spaces

The three *Indifesa* spaces currently in operation are places of listening, support and relationship building designed to meet the needs of girls and boys, young women and families with children. Each was created in a different context and with specific objectives, but they all share a common vision: to offer protection, guidance and opportunities.

The first was established in **Parma** in 2020, in collaboration with the San Martino Association. Spazio ***indifesa*** – Consultami is a genuine listening centre where a multidisciplinary team offers free psychological and legal advice, guidance, cultural and professional workshops, and activities for families, women and children.

In 2021, the second centre was inaugurated in **Milan**, in the Gallarate district, thanks to the support of Fondazione Milan and the provision of space by the municipality. The centre, part of Food Policy Milano, is a hub that combines food support with educational and social services, offering a point of reference for vulnerable families and activities designed for children and adolescents.

The latest space, active since 2024, was opened in **Catania** at the Talitakum premises in Librino, where we had already launched a sex and emotional education programme for the girls of the Vulcano Etna Rugby team in previous years. With the launch of the new space, activities have grown with a specific focus on combating educational poverty.

Events for the general public

indifesa also speaks to the general public through cultural and educational events designed to raise awareness of the rights of girls and young women.

Stand Up for Girls, launched in 2018 with 5x15 Italia, is a format consisting of short talks by personalities from the worlds of entertainment, culture, sport and all those voices that can enrich our perspectives on gender issues. In 2025, Stand Up for Girls came to Rome for the first time, with a sold-out afternoon at the Teatro Nazionale di Roma.

In addition to words, there was the power of images: conceived by Terre des Hommes and curated by Renata Ferri, with photographs by Ilaria Magliocchetti Lombi, the exhibition ***Straordinarie – Protagoniste del presente*** gave a face to over 100 Italian women who overcome barriers and prejudices every day. It was a choral account of new female role models, designed especially for the many girls and boys who visited the exhibition.

Inaugurated in Rome in September 2023 at the MAXXI museum, the exhibition was subsequently hosted in Milan in 2024 at the Fabbrica del Vapore, where a rich programme of side events was also organised. Overall, the two stages attracted over 15,000 visitors, including more than 2,000 students.