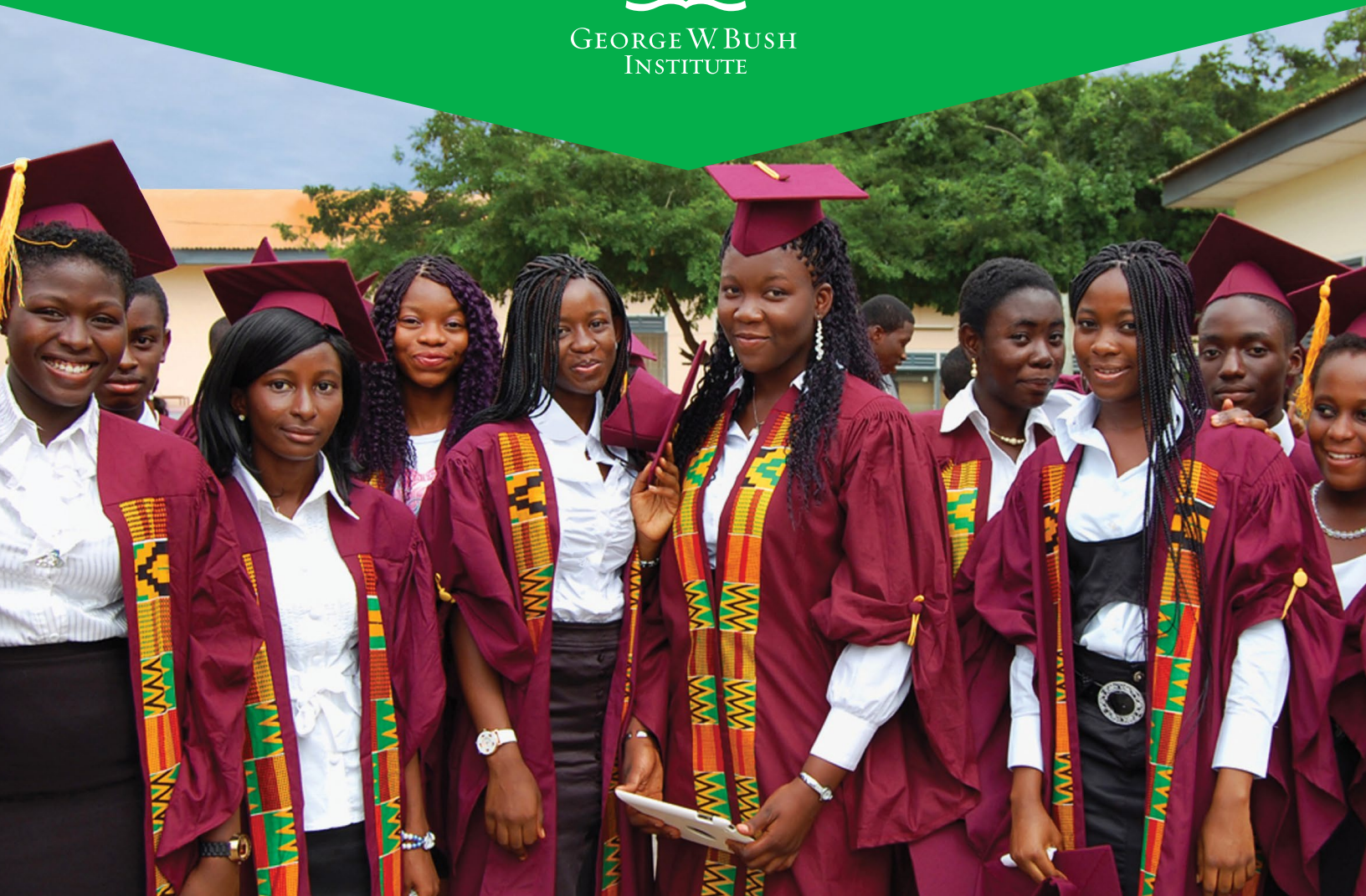


T H E K E Y T O
AFRICA'S FUTURE
I S
F E M A L E

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Executive Summary

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About the George W. Bush Institute

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Adolescence and young adulthood are a seminal time for individuals – especially females. Now more than ever, the United States and the international community must do a better job of directly engaging and supporting adolescent girls and young women (AGYW). This is especially important for sub-Saharan Africa, home to the highest saturation of young people in the world.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Prioritize disaggregated data collection and youth-focused research
- Implement holistic solutions that meet the complex challenges AGYW face
- Include AGYW in decision-making processes
- Invest in youth-led solutions and organizations
- Engage men and boys in gender-equality efforts
- Strengthen and enforce policies that protect agency and promote well-being
- Improve access to information

Right now, nearly half of the world's young people live in sub-Saharan Africa. Forty percent are under the age of 15 and just 6% of the [population](#) is 60 or older. By 2050, the entire population across the continent is expected to double.

When empowered, educated, and healthy, AGYW are able to [contribute](#) to accelerated progress for all. Across sub-Saharan Africa, they are organizing and speaking out to protect human dignity and demand transparency and accountability from governments and private-sector institutions.

In the context of economic opportunity alone, “estimates indicate that 11 million youth will be entering the labor market in sub-Saharan Africa each year for the coming decade, with the potential to dramatically promote growth and reduce poverty,” according to the [World Bank](#). An important consideration, especially as on the surface, the region has some of the highest [rates of female entrepreneurship](#) and [labor force participation](#) in the world.

But while sub-Saharan Africa's young population holds great potential, persistent and multifaceted challenges warrant increased attention. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, young people [accounted for](#) 60% of Africa's jobless, with many stuck within informal and alternative employment options.

Economic and other barriers, and their direct and indirect impacts, are even more acute for AGYW. As the [2019 Goalkeepers report](#) reflects: “No matter where you are born, your life will be harder if you are born a girl. If you are born in a poor country or district, it will be even harder.”

AGYW are more likely to live in poverty and less likely to be in school than their male counterparts; face worrying levels of gender-based violence (GBV) – including child marriage, harassment, sexual assault, coercion, and domestic violence; and be at increased risk for adverse health outcomes due to incomplete access to information and services.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has further compounded the challenges.

Despite years of hard-fought efforts to achieve gender parity in education, [millions of girls](#) will not return to

school when it is safe to do so. GBV, a shadow pandemic on its own, is also on the rise and remains an immense risk for AGYW. Instability [exacerbates abuse and exploitation](#), and there is a risk of sustained increases in sexual assault, domestic violence, trafficking, and early marriage.

Rising rates of teenage pregnancy have been reported, and higher rates of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STI) are a concern. During a three-month lockdown in Kenya alone, 152,000 AGYW became pregnant, [an increase](#) of 40% over last year's average for the same period. Additionally, UNAIDS and the World Health Organization (WHO) [estimate](#) increased HIV incidence and more deaths attributed to HIV due to COVID-19, with girls [especially impacted](#).

Perhaps most worrying, the COVID-19 pandemic has halted and reversed progress in reducing global poverty rates. Despite significant economic growth in the region [before](#) the pandemic, the United Nations (U.N.) [estimates](#) that an additional 32 million people in Africa will drop below the international poverty line as a result of the global health emergency, and the accelerated poverty burden will more [acutely impact](#) women and girls.

At a time when AGYW in sub-Saharan Africa need uninterrupted access to services, opportunities, and care, COVID-19 has created [additional barriers](#) to resources and support.

The challenges are complex and interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation of one another. But in these challenges, there are also opportunities to finally correct course, ensuring AGYW across Africa (and beyond) have a chance to thrive.



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