



When her husband was arrested during the 2015 political crisis, Luscie, 32, fled the Bujumbura province in Burundi with her eight children, with only the clothes on their backs. Since then they have been refugees at the Lusenda camp in DRC. Photo Courtesy: UN Women

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

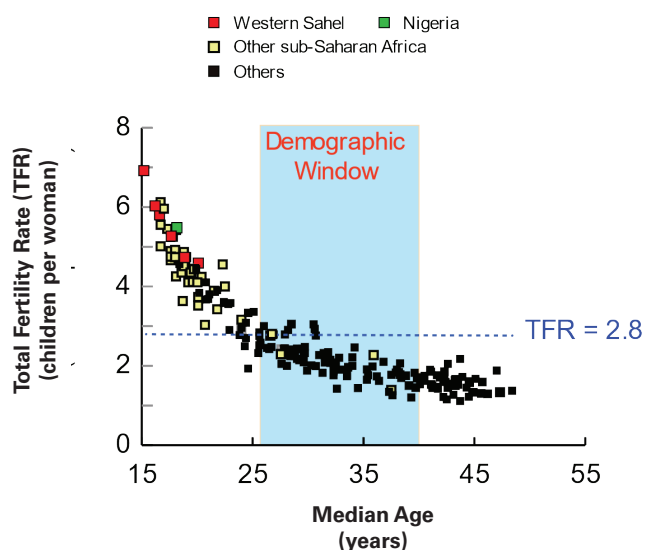
BACKGROUND

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

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Governments in the Sahel—the poorest region in the world—struggle to meet the basic needs of their rapidly growing populations. The region’s persistently youthful, high-fertility populations show no signs of decelerating. Birth rates are three to four times higher in the Sahel than in other parts of the world. From 1960 to 2020, the overall population of six Western Sahel states—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal—grew almost five-fold, **from 21 million to about 103 million inhabitants**. According to the United Nations Population Division, none of these countries **are projected to enter the “demographic window”**—a period of time when a country’s age structure, paired with the right policies, can enable more favorable economic and social conditions—between now and 2045 (see Figure 1). In fact, estimates indicate that the region’s total population size will more than **double** by mid-century and the global trend of urbanization will extend to the Sahel, with **50 percent** of Sahelians living in urban areas by 2045.

FIGURE 1. FERTILITY AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC WINDOW.



Source: Cincotta & Smith, 2021. Data: UNDESA/Population Division, 2019 Rev.

With population growth far outpacing **GDP growth**, out-migration is on the rise as those entering the workforce **seek employment and better opportunities** elsewhere. Given projected population trends, this trend is likely to worsen. An annual GDP growth of 11 percent (7 percent higher than the current 4 percent growth) is needed to sustain current per capita GDP. But it is an impossible goal to achieve. As these pressures further erode the legitimacy of central governments, more young people are turning to non-state armed groups in the face of incapacitated and ineffective state-run services.

In addition to the risks posed by instability, women and girls in the Sahel are highly affected by **gender inequality**, reflected in high levels of maternal mortality and gender-based violence, including child marriage, and low levels of education and literacy. **The maternal mortality ratio in the Western Sahel is nearly three times the global rate** (602 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births compared to 211 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births). There are over 20 million child brides in the Sahel—53 percent of young women marry in childhood (before the age of 18); 19 percent marry before age 15. In central Sahel countries, the rates are even higher—**7 in 10 young women marry before the age of 18**.

Most married adolescent girls (95 percent) in the Sahel do not attend school, contributing to the region’s low literacy rates. In every Sahelian country, **less than half of adult women are literate**, compared with 59 percent of women across sub-Saharan Africa and 80 percent of women across low-and middle-income countries globally. Only **three to six girls out of ten complete primary school in Mali, Chad, and Niger**.

The challenges facing Sahelian countries are mutually reinforcing—but so are their solutions. Family planning and girls’ education are often **disconnected** from the broader security and development discourse, but investments in these





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two areas can yield a wide array of economic and social benefits that simultaneously advance multiple development and security goals. [Increasing girls' school enrollment while expanding access to family planning services](#) allows couples to delay the birth of their first child, facilitates healthier spacing of births, permits women to cease childbearing when they choose, and allows women to increase economic participation.

The resulting decline in fertility shifts the age structure towards a higher median age, enabling a country's population to enter the demographic window. In contrast, a [persistently youthful population](#) (with a median age of 25 years or less) tends to prevent countries from rising into the World Bank's upper-middle class (measured by GNI per capita) and deters countries from reaching similarly high levels of child survival and educational attainment. In addition, persistent youthfulness is associated with low levels of government effectiveness, political instability, and inability to control corruption. The greater violence, youth discontent, civil unrest, and food shortages associated with population growth, youth bulges, and gender inequality can ultimately create conditions where terrorism and transnational crime can take root.

Yet, despite the demonstrated high returns on investments in family planning and girls' education, such investments have not been prioritized in international, regional, and national spending among Sahelian countries. This gap amounts to more than a set of [missed opportunities for women and girls](#)—it fuels the worsening of conditions such as food insecurity, unemployment, displacement, gender-based violence and discrimination, and ultimately weakens governance.

To interrupt these worsening cycles of poverty and instability, the international community must partner with Sahelian communities and governments to empower women and girls. Evidence shows that increasing efforts to boost girls' education, curb child marriage, and ensure access to voluntary family planning not only advances the human rights of women and girls, but also helps to curb insecurity and strengthen governance, benefiting all of society.

Recognizing the importance of the Sahel region, the Wilson Center hosted a roundtable discussion with experts to identify practical steps for advancing strategic investments in the region. This brief covers several key issues and recommendations that emerged from that meeting.



KEY ISSUES

1. U.S. engagement in the Sahel must be recalibrated to counter the intersecting, multicausal drivers of insecurity.

Between 2014 and 2020, the United States disbursed approximately \$809 million in peace and security assistance to the G5 Sahel nations.¹ In comparison, U.S. contributions to family planning in the same time period were approximately \$65 million.² While the United States finances the lion's share of global family planning, investments in this area have stagnated over the past decade.

Yet evidence shows time and time again that [investments in voluntary family planning and girls' education](#) mutually reinforce each other and yield multiple [social, economic, and security benefits that address the root causes of fragility and insecurity](#). Where these investments lag, pressures on communities are magnified, leading to higher poverty rates and higher mortality that further erode a country's stability. To effectively tackle the root causes of fragility and insecurity in the Sahel, the United States and other international donors must take a more comprehensive and integrated approach to addressing insecurity—one that recognizes the stabilizing effects of high-yield investments in voluntary family planning and girls' education.

With just over \$100 million more directed annually towards voluntary family planning, and \$1.2 billion towards education, the donor community could set the Sahel on a new, more prosperous path. As the largest [single humanitarian donor](#), the United States could lead this effort. But

garnering bipartisan Congressional support may pose a challenge. [Lack of progress](#) in curtailing destabilization in the Sahel has led U.S. lawmakers to increasingly question whether augmenting international aid will address the region's humanitarian needs.

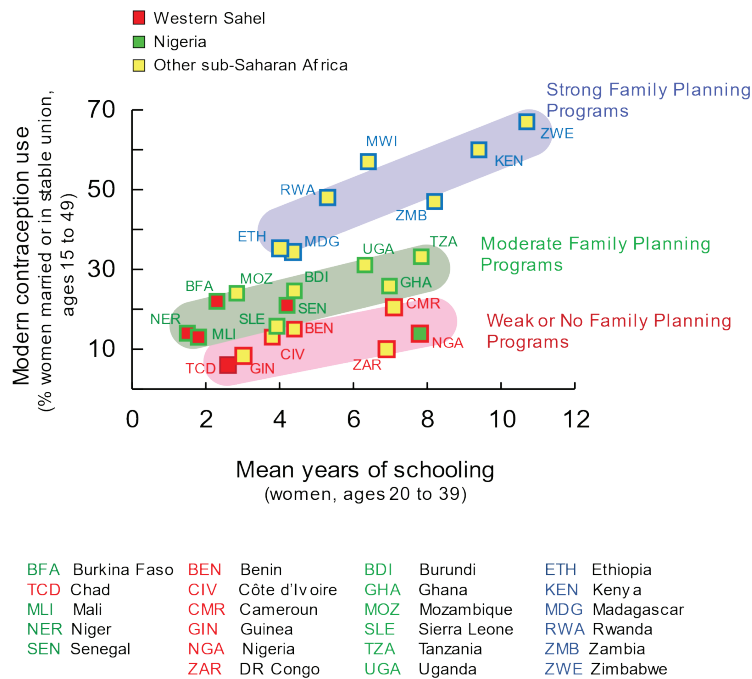
2. International funding for education and voluntary family planning in the region could be increased to yield significant gains.

Education and voluntary family planning generate a significant return on investment. Every [\\$1 invested in voluntary family planning](#) produces \$120 in future economic, social, and health gains. In comparison, benefits per dollar spent on peacekeeping troops, reduction of child malnutrition, and immunization expansion are far lower—\$5, \$45, and \$60, respectively. Yet financing for family planning falls well short of what is needed. Currently, the family planning sector is only 26 percent funded. Estimates show that \$144 million/year—or another \$107 million/year—is required to fulfill the [unmet need for family planning in the Sahel](#).

Investments in the education sphere similarly yield high returns. In sub-Saharan Africa, for each year of schooling completed, [women's earnings rise by 14.5 percent](#). At the national level, increasing girls' secondary school completion rates to 100 percent by 2030 could add 10 percent more growth in GDP. Cumulative economic returns are estimated to be even higher after 2030. Nonetheless, funding for universal primary and secondary education falls well short of what is needed. At present, the education sector is 16 percent funded. Another \$1.2 billion is needed to close primary and secondary education gaps across the Sahel countries.³



FIGURE 2. GIRLS' EDUCATION, FAMILY PLANNING EFFORT, AND MODERN CONTRACEPTIVE USE.



Source: Bongaarts & Hardee, 2019. Data: UNDESA/Population Division, 2019 (most recent surveys).

3. Societal considerations for expanding voluntary family planning and girls' education

As investments in girls' education and voluntary family planning are scaled up, it's important to recognize the diverse range of cultural and social factors that influence fertility preferences, power relations at the household and community level, and ultimately, women and girls' access to health and education services. In highly patriarchal societies, support for locally-led efforts to provide "safe spaces" for adolescent girls to learn has significantly increased [secondary school completion rates and delayed marriage](#); in addition, engaging men through initiatives, like "Husbands' School,"

has helped communities, by improving access to health care and family planning, reducing malnutrition among children, and decreasing child marriage.

For Sahelian women to achieve self-determination, power dynamics and structures must be modified, perhaps encompassing [gender-equal legislation](#), empowerment of civil society groups, and greater synergy between global agendas. While political will for gender-based legislation exists in countries throughout the region, opposition from traditional groups, such as faith and community leaders, who are good at mobilizing and influencing legislative outcomes, may slow progress.





Women drawing water from a well in the Sahel. Photo Courtesy: Pierre Laborde /shutterstock.com

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Address demographic challenges through increased emphasis and funding for girls' education and family planning.**

Investments in gender equality and women's rights are paramount to realizing the "demographic window" in the Sahel. Governments in the region and the international donor community must boost spending on girls' education and voluntary family planning. Education and informational campaigns targeted at communities and ministries of health and education should reemphasize the importance of education and access to quality family planning services and products.

Barriers to girls' education should be identified and addressed, including child marriage, school absenteeism due to menstruation and/or lack of menstrual hygiene products, cultural and religious norms, and financial burdens.

Health and education ministries must ensure that information campaigns and programming

on girls' education and voluntary family planning is shared throughout the region, reaching Sahelians in both rural and urban communities, especially as more Sahelians move into larger towns and cities.

- **Invest in strengthening diverse partnerships.**

As government, donor, and civil society partners increasingly recognize the importance of the family planning and education sectors, leveraging partnerships across these communities will be key to the success of investments. Using this momentum to build, strengthen, and expand partnerships will help to solidify efforts to provide women and girls with essential services.

This focus on partnership must extend to relationship building with local civil society and organizations leading the work on the ground. To "localize" development, it is critical to harness and support the leadership of local actors. These partnerships can also help ensure global health programs collaborate with civil society groups and



local organizations to hold governments accountable to their [Family Planning 2030 commitments](#).

In the highly patriarchal societies of the Sahel, partnerships and engagement with religious leaders, men, and boys can help shift gender norms that hinder progress on access to family planning and education. In fact, gender norms are already shifting. Younger generations of men in the Sahel place greater value on gender equality and political activism than their older counterparts. However, local partnerships and interventions must equip them with the tools to carry these values throughout the rest of their lives, including after marriage.

- **Leverage and expand multi-sectoral, integrated responses to fragility and insecurity.**

Introducing interventions at the scale necessary to counter insecurity in the Sahel will take increased cooperation between donors and governments and better coordination across sectors and local, regional, and national levels to mobilize resources; align programmatic and funding objectives; and reinforce institutional capacity. Likewise, a comprehensive approach must address the persistent violence and terrorism that weaken girls' education programs. While increased investment in girls' education and voluntary family planning is critical to addressing insecurity in the Sahel, it is just one component of what must be a broader, multi-sector strategy in the region. With the [U.S. Global Fragility Strategy](#) and partnership in the Sahel Alliance, the United States is positioned to lead on the well-articulated priorities of both efforts, including

opportunities for youth and the advancement of women's leadership and participation.

- **Enable flexible funding and capitalize upon legislative opportunities.**

Not only is more funding needed to expand voluntary family planning and girls' education, but this funding must also be flexible and directly support local partners—coupled with accountability, transparency, and a coordinated approach. U.S. Agency for International Development Administrator Samantha Power's [vision for locally led development](#) is a strategy that seeks to enable direct funding to local partners. Additionally, legislative tools like gender quotas are effective in increasing women's representation within positions of power and improving gender equality.

Currently, international financing is organized around programmatic and national silos, which can limit its effectiveness across sectors. Donors must move away from bilateral funding models to more flexible regional funding models that cross-cut multiple sectors and enable transversal structures and institutions to support broad, multi-sectoral engagement in the Sahel.

To overcome bureaucratic bottlenecks when engaging with Congress, practitioners must present a clear effectiveness argument, spotlighting successful examples of how domestic resources have been mobilized and global finance facilities utilized. Legislators need to know the United States is not alone in channeling security and development investments to the Sahel.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Drawing on experiences with demographic transition from around the world, [What Future for the Western Sahel? The Region's Demography and its Implications by 2045](#), outlines a range of scenarios for the Sahel region in which varying demographic futures interact with climate change impacts, conflict, advances in health and education, prospects for governance reforms, and other factors.
- [A Fulcrum for the Future](#), documents the current status of voluntary family planning services and girls' education in the Sahel, and estimates the cost of closing the family planning and education gap in the G5 Sahel countries.
- USAID's [Resilience and Economic Growth in the Sahel - Enhanced Resilience](#) program is a multi-sectoral resilience project that aims to eradicate triggers of chronic vulnerability and catalyze development in Niger and Burkina Faso.
- USAID's [Resilience and Economic Growth in the Sahel - Accelerated Growth](#) program seeks to augment rural income by transforming high-potential value chains.
- The [Coalition of the Sahel](#) works across four pillars to address security challenges: coordinate training activities, rapidly deploy government services, improve living conditions, and address root causes of fragility.
- Non-traditional forms of education can also delay early marriage and childbearing. OASIS's [Safe Spaces for In School Girls](#) initiative is a mentored girls' club that provides a safe and secure convening place for girls in rural and low-income communities to connect, learn, and gain important life skills. Research indicates that participation in these mentored girls clubs deferred early marriage by 2.5 years.
- The [How Can We Better Reach Women and Girls in Crises](#) report urges the United States to prioritize women's and girls' health and protection in emergency settings, using flexible funding, in order to improve resilience and health security, all of which further breaks down silos.

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Sources: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Atlantic Council, Center for Strategic and International Studies, FP2030, OASIS, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Population Matters, Sahel Alliance, UNICEF, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations Population Division, U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Department of State, U.S. Mission to the United Nations, U.S. Mission to the UN Agencies in Rome, World Bank, World Vision.

Figure Sources: Cincotta, Richard, and Stephen Smith. *What Future for the Western Sahel? The Region's Demography and Its Implications by 2045*. Atlantic Council, November 4, 2021. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/AC_What-Future-for-the-Western-Sahel_final.pdf.

Bongaarts, John, and Karen Hardee. *Trends in contraceptive prevalence in Sub-Saharan Africa: The roles of family planning programs and education*. *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 23, no. 3 (2019): 96-105.

ENDNOTES





1. Source: Peace and Security dataset from US Foreign Assistance Explorer. Includes flows for Transnational Crime, Counter-Terrorism, Stabilization Operations and Security Sector Reform, Counter-Narcotics, Peace and Security - General (includes peacekeeping missions), Conflict Mitigation and Reconciliation, and Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).
2. Source: Health dataset from US Foreign Assistance Explorer. Includes Family Planning and Reproductive Health sectors.
3. The full funding scenario reflects the cost of universal education as opposed to girls' education specifically because availability of gender-disaggregated education data is limited. Moreover, advancing girls' educational prospects depends on a well-developed education infrastructure more broadly.





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