



# Adolescent Mental Health:

A collaboration between the GEAS,  
**UNICEF** and 13 country partners

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Population, Family and  
Reproductive Health

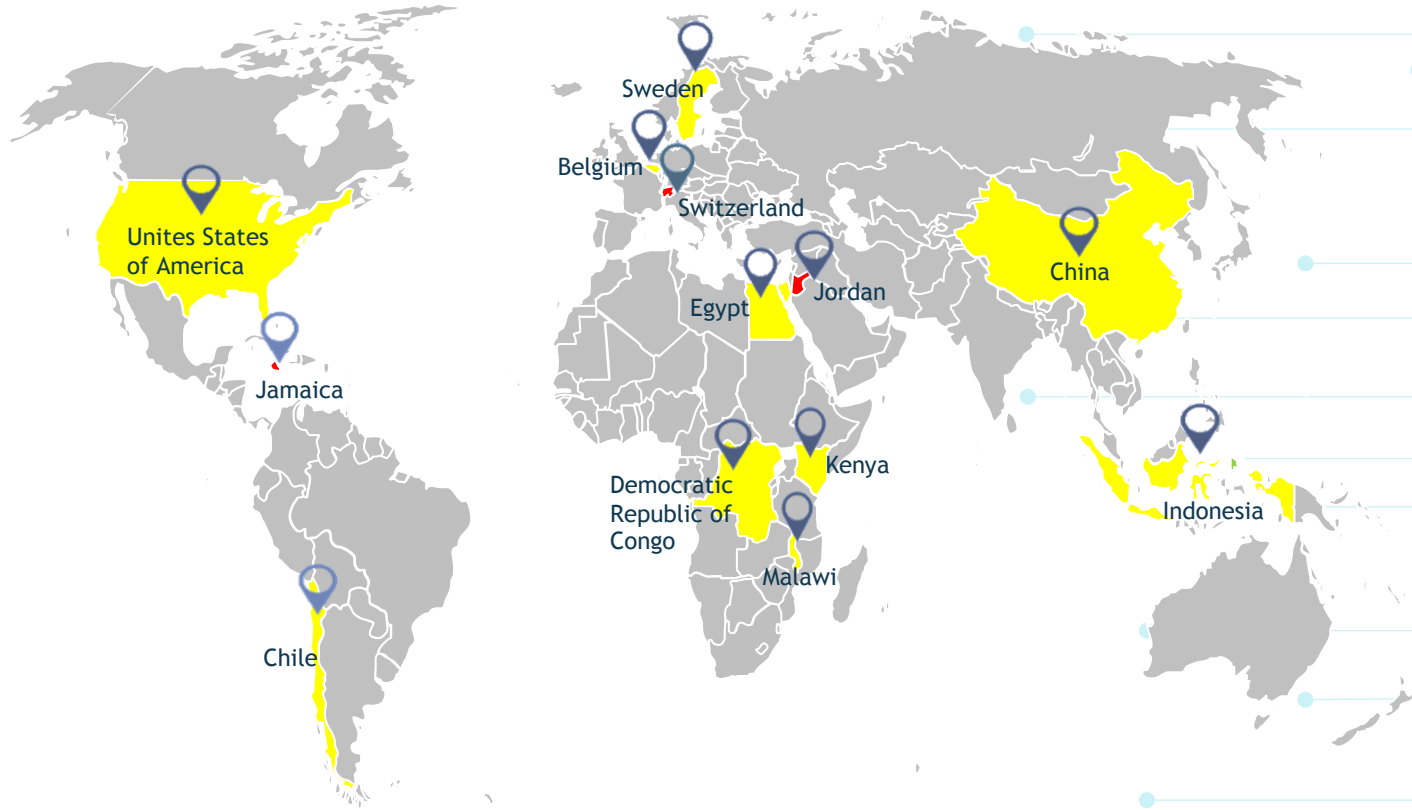


# Central Purpose of the Study

- To understand the primary mental health concerns of adolescents from their perspectives.
- To understand from the lens of young people what causes and protects young people from mental health problems.
- To understand the ways in which young people cope with mental health problems, including help-seeking behaviors.
- To provide UNICEF with qualitative data to complement the quantitative analyses of the SWC Report



# UNICEF FGD Sites



# Mental Health: Distress or Disorder?

## ➤ Distress: the lived experiences of adolescents

- *“[Being tired psychologically] means that you feel that you are not living life and [are] unable to do anything and [are] bored, keeping to yourself and you don't want to deal with anyone....Even if you are ambitious, you will not be able to achieve your ambitions because you are psychologically totally defeated.”* (Older girl, Egypt)
- *“I get very sad and then I start to shiver, I start to run out of air and then I start to cry, like without being able to hold it...I look like a zombie and I have nothing else to do or I try to get my spirits up but until I sleep it will not happen.”* (Younger girl, Chile)

# Vulnerabilities Driving Mental Health

- **FGDs highlighted multifaceted vulnerabilities that many adolescents experience on a daily basis, and how these vulnerabilities continually threaten mental health and well-being:**
  - **Specific examples include disconnect between girls' desires for self-actualization and traditional community values:**

*"I wish to work and have my own independent personality and I don't want to depend on my family in everything or to get married to someone who wants to control me as he wishes...I wish to live a different way but the society and the whole world is surrounding me with something I don't know and I feel disabled."* (Older girl, Egypt)
  - **Links between profound poverty and mental health:**

*"At school, there are rules that everyone should dress up completely...you need a good shoe. You find that at your home they cannot provide that for you and you are putting on "crocs." Others...they get that "croc" and start throwing it at each other. "Look at this!" And the whole class starts laughing at you. It is so painful for us young people...it is so terrible...So without any emotional or psychological support, that is when you hear that a student has committed suicide."* (Older boy, Malawi)

# Vulnerabilities Driving Mental Health

## ➤ Pervasive threats of sexual violence:

- “[Girls worry about] coming home alive or even safe or even making it home...most times I don't even leave my road because you have some perverts in my community and sometimes I feel very uncomfortable, you know? And even if you tell somebody or say it to somebody like an adult, they will not believe you.” (Older girl, Jamaica)
- “There are also some girls while they walk in the street, the boys touch her body with their hands [so] she has fear to go outside her home,[is] anxious and looks around while walking.” (Younger girl, Egypt)
- “So, you are a girl and you're staying with your dad, only the two of you. When he is drunk, he stops seeing you as a baby and his mind makes him see you as his wife. You can end up being raped by your father.” (Younger girl, Kenya)

# School as a source of Risk and Protection

## ➤ Protection

- **Teacher Support:** *“I was only in this school for a week, but before I entered the first, the first half, in the eighth grade I have seen teachers helping young people about their problems and their sexual orientation. There were some people who felt like a man, who felt like a woman, a homosexual, right? A woman who felt like a man, a lesbian, and the teacher listened to them and helped them about it.”* (Younger boy, Chile)
- **School as a Safe Place:** *“When students leave home and go to school it means problems of rape will not be there because school is one of the places which protects young people from abuses of rape.”* (Older girl, Malawi)

## ➤ Risk

- **Predatory teachers:** *The teachers harass girls even in primary or preparatory school, he touches her in ways and she is unable to talk, because if she does, he will fail her and if she tells her people, they will say: ‘you are wrong, no teacher would do that’.* (Older girl, Egypt)
- **Corporal punishment:** *I was walking in the park last year, and then I met a little girl and chatted with her casually. [She described that] they (students) would kneel on the ground if they didn’t do their homework, and then the teacher hit them on the back with a ruler, I felt especially scary (sic).* (Younger girl, China)

# Risk and Protection within Family Relationships

## ➤ Lack of feeling valued:

- *“There are many parents who do not care for their daughters. They tell her, ‘You came by mistake, we do not want you, and you are not our daughter.’ The girl [comes to] hate herself and regrets that she came into this world.”* (Younger girl, Jordan)
- *“[Parents invalidating our experiences] happens a lot. For example...a person tells [their] parents [about] their problems and parents can say, ‘...You don't have debt or anything for you to be sad [about]’. So, I don't tell my parents [about my problems].”* (Younger boy, Chile)



# Self-harm: A Global Experience

- We heard about **cutting and other non-suicidal self-harm behaviors** from both boys and girls in Kenya, Malawi, Jordan, Indonesia, Egypt, Jamaica and Chile:
  - *“[There is] a lot of self-harming, even causing death? There is a lot of that in our age group, especially due to low self-esteem, family problems, harassment and that kind of thing, they are serious problems and I feel that this is very latent nowadays, especially for women.” (Older girl, Chile)*

# Self-harm: One Like, One Cut

- Young people in China spoke about the role of social media in promoting self-harm through cutting. As one adolescent girl explained:
  - Adolescent: *...one thumbs up [means] one cut.*
  - The group facilitator asks: *“One thumbs up, one cut? It means cut themselves?”*
  - The adolescent goes on to explain that cutting oneself can temporarily make you feel happy but the happiness is short lived:  
*“They feel happy at first and then throw [away] the knife they hold, and then after a few days, feel unhappy again”. (Older girl, China)*

# The malignant effects of gender norms

- *“The girl loves her studies and is interested in her studies more [than marrying early]. [But her parents] tell her to leave school because in the end, ‘You will be in your husband's house. Girls are created to marry and work.’ (Younger girl, Jordan)*
- *“I think a lot of people who identify as female are...very concerned about... being judged. And...a lot more people are quicker to judge a female by their looks.” (Younger girl, USA)*
- *“Society tells us that as long as you are born with a penis then you’re not supposed to be expressive. ‘Real men don't cry’...and that is something that fathers instill, fathers and mothers alike. Especially in Jamaica, they don't want you to grow as no ‘chi-chi boy’ (homosexual).” (Older boy, Jamaica)*
- *“In our society, I have the impression that a man does not have the right to experience his feelings...At home, they will tell me that you cannot cry...you have to be strong...they often tell us this, that we should be strong and not show our weaknesses.” (Older boy, Switzerland)*

# Coping Strategies: Talking with family, peers, strangers on the internet and using drugs

## ➤ Drugs

- *“A lot of them use those [drugs] so that they should forget their problems which they are going through in their lives like not given food, being called different names... so she just uses drugs to forget problems about her life.”* (Older girl, Malawi)

## ➤ Peers

- *“Good friends can hold your hand, [but] they can also hold you accountable and when you are about to do something that is bad, they will just tell you that whatever you are about to do is not good.”* (Older boy, Kenya)

## ➤ Internet

- *“When you don’t trust anyone, you find someone. As an example, [she finds] a girl on Facebook. She does not know her and she narrates her story then blocks her so she can't tell anybody about it.”* (Older girl, Jordan)

# State of the World Children's Report



<https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-worlds-children-2021>

or from the GEAS website [bit.ly/GEAS-SOWC2021](https://bit.ly/GEAS-SOWC2021)

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# Thank You

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