

Leave no girl behind

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In his address to the Rotary International Convention in June 2021, Shekhar Mehta urged Rotary members to put improving girls' futures at the forefront of their work. "It is important that we empower girls," said Mehta, who was shortly to take office as the 2021-22 Rotary president, "as we all find that more often than not, the girl is disadvantaged. We will serve all children, but our laser focus will be specially on the girl."

Mehta made empowering girls one of his presidential initiatives, and his focus is particularly timely. Women continue to face economic hurdles, declining levels of political participation, and challenges in the workplace, according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021. And the COVID-19 pandemic is among the factors that have extended the amount of time that experts estimate it will take to close the gender gap from an already daunting 99.5 years to 135.6 years.



Creating opportunities for girls has the power to transform their futures.

Photos from left: Monika Lozinska, Anindito Mukherjee; ©Rotary International

"Especially for girls, creating opportunities that enhance their education, safety, health, and well-being has the power to transform their futures - and also to transform their families and communities," says Elizabeth Usovicz, a member of the RI Board of Directors. "Rotary members worldwide can make a difference in

transforming communities by empowering girls."

Usovicz is also the chair of the Empowering Girls Task Force, which was established as part of Mehta's initiative. And within zones and regions, Rotary has designated Empowering Girls ambassadors who can provide resources for districts and clubs and suggest ways to incorporate support for girls into existing projects or make it the basis for new ones.

"The Empowering Girls initiative is a club- and district-level service opportunity," Usovicz notes. "The primary role of the task force is to develop a framework and resources that enhance the ability of Rotary and Rotaract club members and leaders, as well as district leaders, to participate in and promote service projects that focus on the health, education, safety, well-being, and economic development of the girls of our world."

The task force members will also ensure that the RI directors and the new Empowering Girls ambassadors are kept informed, advocate for and monitor global engagement with the initiative and the impact of related projects, and make certain that Rotary members worldwide are aware of the initiative and understand how to participate.

"There is no shortage of need, and the impact of even simple projects can be significant when the power of Rotary is focused on empowering girls."

-- Elizabeth Usovicz, RI director

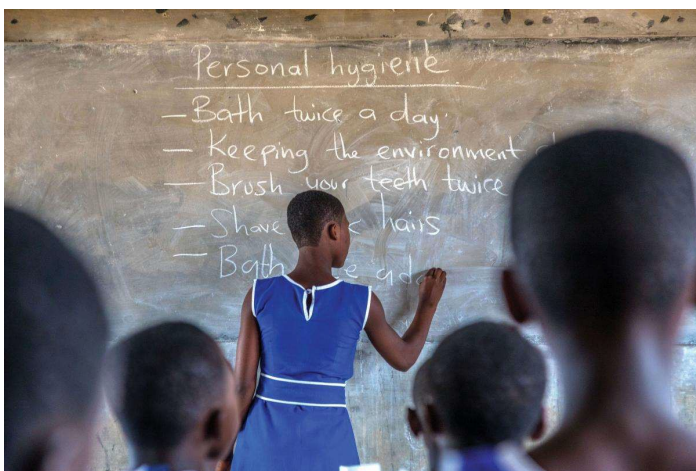
"The ambassadors are a very enthusiastic and committed group of Rotary leaders," Usovicz says. "They play a key role in supporting clubs and districts in their regions, and in building enthusiasm for participation. They provide guidance on developing projects, connect club members and leaders with resources and information to help them to implement projects that empower girls, and provide ongoing encouragement."

Annemarie Mostert is one such ambassador. A member of the E-Club of Southern Africa D9400, Mostert is also a member of The Rotary Foundation Cadre of Technical Advisers. "Educated women are more likely to have greater decision-making power within their households," Mostert wrote in a piece for the regional magazine Rotary Africa-South in August. "Let's encourage our girls to be smart, to study science and mathematics, to have a positive body image, to step into leadership positions. As people of action, we will be helping communities to break the cycle of poverty. By helping girls access quality education, we ensure economic independence, food security, resilience, environmental sustainability, and a better world for all."

It's especially important, she noted, for clubs to share the work they are doing. Clubs can tell the stories of their projects that focus on empowering girls by posting them to Rotary Showcase using the tag "EmpoweringGirls2021" and by sharing them on social media.

"Our call to action is to leave no girl behind," Mostert wrote. "Every Rotary and Rotaract club should implement at least one Empowering Girls activity this year. Set up a global grant by focusing on health, education, or economic independence. Partner with a Rotary Action Group, share best practices, collaborate with other clubs and civil society."

Young people in Rotary are already taking the lead on this initiative in their countries. "Growing up, I always knew I wanted to work on girls' empowerment and the rights of women," says Soffa Brega, a member of the Rotaract Club of Juarez Centro, Mexico. "I wanted to be an activist for women's rights." Working with the UN Foundation's Girl Up initiative, which aims to unleash the power of young girls to bring about social change, Brega founded a club in Ciudad Juarez called Girl Up Fronterizas.



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The global gender gap in 2021

- In 2021, the Global Gender Gap Index benchmarked 156 countries.
- Iceland is the most gender-equal country in the world.
- The five most improved countries since 2020 in the overall index are: Togo, United Arab Emirates, Lithuania, Timor-Leste, Serbia
- Three new countries have been assessed this year for the first time: Afghanistan (which ranks 156th), Guyana (53rd), Niger (138th)

It will take 121.7 years to close the gender gap in sub-Saharan Africa. More than half of the countries in the region (20 out of 35) made progress in the past year, though only Namibia and Rwanda have closed at least 80 percent of that gap.

"As a member of Rotaract, and being just 22 years old, I'm striving to do my part in bringing about sustainable and lasting social change," Brega says. "There are thousands of Rotaractors just like me who want to see the issue of girls' empowerment brought front and center."

"After attending a Positive Peace workshop organized by the Institute for Economics and Peace, a Rotary strategic partner, Brega is now a Rotary Positive Peace Activator, and she's bringing her new skills to the realm of empowering girls. "Although I was a committed activist for women's rights, it wasn't until I attended the Positive Peace workshop that I realized that my entire discourse was coming from the wrong perspective," she says. "I was focusing on violence and conflict, where instead I should have been talking about Positive Peace and how my efforts on girls' empowerment can support that."

"Just as work to build peace intersects with work to empower girls, projects in any of Rotary's areas of focus can also have a positive effect on the future of girls, Usovicz notes. In the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) area of focus, she says, one example might be a WASH in Schools project to provide gender-segregated toilet facilities that will enable girls to attend school regularly. A literacy project might include funding scholarships for girls from underserved communities. Clubs can also sponsor girls to attend RYLA events; work with schools to provide girls with vocational or skills training, such as financial literacy or self-defense; or partner with a local nonprofit organization to serve girls in the community.

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World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report

The report, now in its 15th edition, charts the evolution of gender-based gaps, examines the drivers of such gaps, and outlines policies and practices needed for a gender-inclusive recovery. Find the report at wef.ch/gendergap21.

Key 2021 findings include:

The economic gender gap has seen only a marginal improvement since the 2020 edition and is expected to take another 267.6 years to close.

Women hold 26.1 percent of parliamentary seats and 22.6 percent of ministerial positions in the countries assessed by the report. On its current trajectory, the political gender gap is now expected to take 145.5 years to close, up significantly from 94.5 years in the 2020 edition of the report.

More key findings:

In education, 37 countries have reached gender parity; however, it will still take another 14.2 years to close this gap completely, due to a slowing of progress.

In health, 96 percent of the gender gap has been closed, registering a marginal decline since last year.