

Key Action Points

- 1 Consult adolescent girls in all stages of disaster preparedness and response.
- 2 Train and mobilise women to work in emergency response teams.
- 3 Provide targeted services for adolescent girls in the core areas of education, protection and sexual and reproductive health.
- 4 Include funding for protection against gender-based violence in the first phase of emergency response.
- 5 Collect sex and age disaggregated data, to show the needs of adolescent girls and inform programme planning.

"Failure to put women's and girls' needs and concerns explicitly in humanitarian work undermines the effectiveness of relief efforts."

Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director, UN Women⁴²

"I want someone who I can go to if there are problems. We should be able to tell our government that we need help, that we need shelter, food, jobs, school, places to wash privately. I want a way that I can be heard."

Sheila, 16, Philippines

'Because I am a Girl' is an annual report published by Plan which assesses the current state of the world's girls. While women and children are recognised in policy and planning, girls' needs and rights are often ignored. The reports provide evidence, including the voices of girls themselves, as to why they need to be treated differently from boys and adult women. They also use information from primary research, in particular a small study set up in 2006 following 142 girls from nine countries. Past reports have covered education, conflict, economic empowerment, cities and technology, and how boys and young men can support gender equality. Plan is an international development agency and has been working with children and their communities in 50 countries worldwide for over 75 years.

Take action at: plan-international.org/girls

BECAUSE
**I am a
Girl**

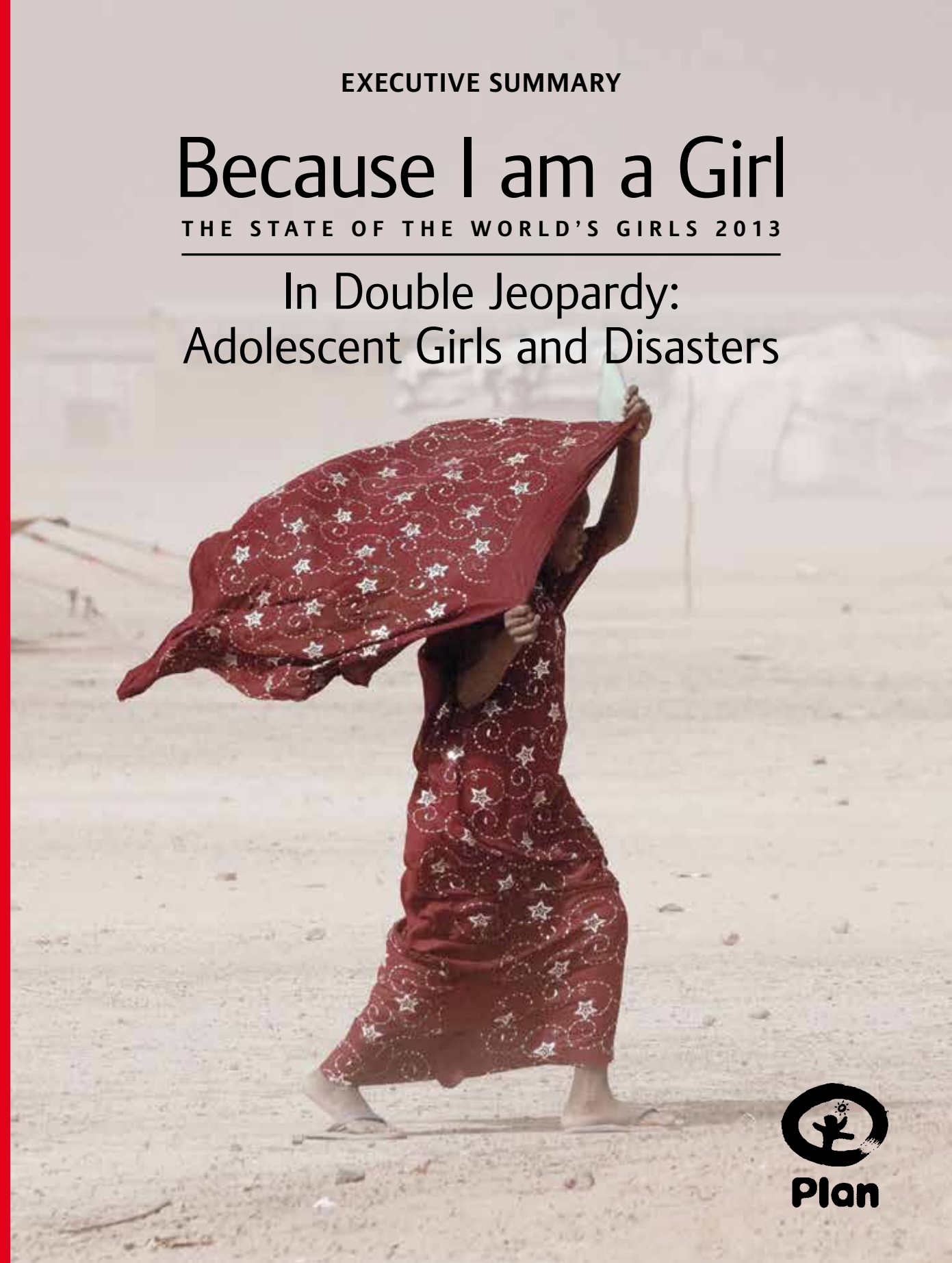
PLAN/PETTERIK WIGGERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Because I am a Girl

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS 2013

In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters



In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters

“Disasters don’t discriminate, but people do... disasters reinforce, perpetuate and increase gender inequality, making bad situations worse for women.”

Making Disaster Risk Reduction gender-sensitive: policy and practical guidelines

“I think the worst challenges were that we were not able to speak. The community would not recognize that we had something important to say because we were young and female.”

Xiomara, 19, El Salvador¹

Disasters are not experienced in a vacuum. What happens to an adolescent girl in such times is directly related to attitudes to women and girls in the wider community and the political, economic, social and cultural context. It is also affected by the family she comes from, as well as her status, age, ability, material wellbeing and a range of other factors linked to the country she lives in and the social groups to which she belongs. So a 17-year-old girl in a slum in Dhaka will experience a flood or an earthquake differently from a 12-year-old in a village in El Salvador or even a 14-year-old in Australia. But what they do have in common is that all too often, as far as humanitarian response is concerned, out of sight really does mean out of mind.

Disasters and crises have a negative effect on everyone involved. People die and are injured, lose their families and their livelihoods. But if you are female, and particularly if you are an adolescent, disasters and crises may put you at greater risk than if you are male; especially in those societies where girls are already less privileged than their brothers. The reason can be summed up in one simple word: power.

It is the relative powerlessness of women and children in many societies that makes them more vulnerable during disasters. Although there is often little distinction made between women and girls or between boys and girls, in general, women and children are 14 times more likely than men to die in a disaster.² In 2010, a study in Pakistan found that 85 per cent of those displaced by floods were women and children³ and during the Asian tsunami in 2004, up to 45,000 more women than men died.⁴

The London School of Economics (LSE) research in 141 countries found that boys generally received preferential treatment over girls in rescue efforts.⁵ It quotes a story of a father “who, when unable to hold on to both his son and his daughter from being swept away by a tidal surge in the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh – released his daughter, because ‘[this] son has to carry on the family line’.”

1 Interview with Jean Casey, Project Coordinator: ‘Because I am a Girl’ Report, Plan International El Salvador, 2012 2 Peterson, Kristina. ‘From the Field: Gender Issues in Disaster Response and Recovery.’ *Natural Hazards Observer*, Special Issue on Women and Disasters 21, No. 5 (1997) <http://www.colorado.edu/hazards/o/archives/1997/may97/may97a.html#From> 3 Action Aid Pakistan. ‘Rebuilding Lives Post 2010 Floods.’ Action Aid Pakistan, 2011. 4 Telford, John, John Cosgrove, and Rachel Houghton. ‘Joint evaluation of the international response to the Indian Ocean tsunami: Synthesis Report.’ London: Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC), 2006. Note from Report: This estimate is based on the differential mortality rates 38 shown in Figure 2.3 applied to the total numbers of dead and missing for each area, with the mortality rate for the nearest area being applied to areas for which no mortality data were available, and population distribution being estimated where area specific mortality was not available. Strictly speaking, not all were adult women as slightly higher female mortality rates were also seen in the under 15s in some places. 5 Neumayer Eric and Thomas Plumper. ‘The Gendered Nature of Natural Disasters: the impact of catastrophic events on the gender gap in life expectancy, 1981-2002.’ *London School of Economics and Political Science*, 2007, [http://www2.lse.ac.uk/geographyAndEnvironment/whosWho/profiles/neumayer/pdf/Article%20in%20Annals%20\(natural%20disasters\).pdf](http://www2.lse.ac.uk/geographyAndEnvironment/whosWho/profiles/neumayer/pdf/Article%20in%20Annals%20(natural%20disasters).pdf) (last accessed 10 May 2013).



JODI HILTON/IRIN

For many adolescent girls a major disaster simply adds to the individual risks they have to face in everyday life. This is especially true if they come from poor families, though violence and discrimination can affect girls regardless of their background. Worldwide, more than a quarter of girls experience sexual abuse and violence; 66 million are still not in school; and in the developing world, one in every three is married before her eighteenth birthday.^{6,7,8}

“During and immediately after a disaster, we are forced to engage in daily wage labour to earn some income. We have to face the lascivious looks of the landowners and other men who employ us in on- and off-farm labour work. The way they treat us is also a form of sexual abuse.”

Girls from Babiya Village, Nepal⁹

The risk faced by adolescent girls is only one side of the story though. Many, like this 16-year-old from Nagapattinam, show courage and initiative: *“On the day of the tsunami, I lifted the two-day-old baby and took the two small boys and ran to the terrace of my house when it started flooding.”*¹⁰

So why is it important to re-examine how the humanitarian community addresses the needs of adolescent girls in disasters?

First, because the number of disasters is increasing – there were 90 a year in the 1970s and almost 450 a year in the last decade.^{11, 12}

Second, we know that disasters overwhelmingly affect the countries and the people that can least afford to deal with them – nine out of ten disasters and 95 per cent of deaths caused by disasters take place in the developing world.^{13, 14} For the children and young people involved, the negative effects of disasters can last for the rest of their lives, as the United Nations Human Development Report notes: “Malnutrition is not an affliction that is shaken off when the rains return or the flood waters recede. It creates cycles of disadvantage that children will carry with them throughout their lives.”¹⁵

Third, what is happening to adolescent girls in disasters is both predictable and preventable, and as such is a violation of their rights in law. Guidelines may exist, but they are not being followed. “Gender equality is not a luxury or a privilege,” says a 2012 interagency paper on gender and security. It is grounded in international legal frameworks that include: international human rights law, women’s human rights and children’s rights.¹⁶

Fourth, in practice, the humanitarian and development communities often work in separate silos. This has a negative effect on groups such as adolescent girls that may be invisible in both contexts. In 2015 both the Millennium Development Goals are set to be reformulated. In the run up to this, there is a growing global discussion about challenging “business as usual” by restructuring development and what is known as disaster risk management (DRM).

Now is the time to focus on adolescent girls and redress a major gap in humanitarian and development programming.



PLAN/MIKE GOLDWATER

6 WHO. ‘Women’s Health: Fact Sheet No. 334.’ WHO, 2009, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs334/en/index.html> (last accessed 13 May 2013). 7 UNESCO. ‘Education For All Global Monitoring Report: Youth and Skills: Putting Education to Work.’ Paris: UNESCO, 2012. 8 UNICEF. ‘State of the World’s Children 2011: Adolescence an Age of Opportunity.’ New York: UNICEF, 2011. 9 Plan Nepal. ‘Impact of Climate change on children in Nepal.’ Plan Nepal and the National Disaster Risk Reduction Centre Nepal, 2012. 10 Plan International Asia Regional Office. ‘Children and the Tsunami: Engaging with children in disaster response, recovery and risk reduction: Learning from children’s participation in the tsunami response.’ Thailand: Plan International Asia Regional Office, 2005. 11 Experts differ but reasons for this include climate change, rapid urbanization, poverty, and environmental degradation. 12 Mazurana, Dyan, Prisca Benelli, Huma Gupta and Peter Walker. ‘Sex and Age Matter: Improving Humanitarian Response in Emergencies.’ Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, August 2011. 13 Swarup, Anita, Irene Dankelman, Kanwal Ahluwalia and Kelly Hawrylyshyn. ‘Weathering the storm: Adolescent girls and climate change.’ Plan International, 2011. 14 Leoni, Brigitte and Tim Radford. ‘Disaster through a Different Lens: Behind Every Effect, There Is a Cause - A Guide for Journalists Covering Disaster Risk Reduction.’ UNISDR, 2011. 15 UNDP. ‘Human Development Report 2007/8. Fighting Climate change: human solidarity in a divided world.’ New York: UNDP, 2007. 16 Persaud, Christine. ‘Gender and Security Guidelines for Mainstreaming Gender in Security Risk Management, EISF Briefing Paper.’ European Interagency Security Forum (EISF), 2012.

A question of survival: health and wellbeing in disasters

“This has been very hard for my family and myself. We lost loved ones, our hearts ache, we have difficulty trying to find food and a place to live... My mother tells us that we have to believe in tomorrow, believe in a future. I do, but sometimes it's hard when everything feels like it is falling apart.”

Sheila, 16, Rizal province, the Philippines, after Typhoon Ondoy¹⁷

Adolescent girls face specific health problems during a disaster or emergency, and yet these are often ignored by those in charge of humanitarian assistance. Access to food and water, the priorities of humanitarian assistance, are key to girls' survival, but so too is access to information about health, including sexual and reproductive health; provision of appropriate health services and supplies targeted at girls, as well as the means to access those services; privacy and safe spaces; and a sense that their specific health needs are recognised and acted upon by those in power.

“There is an overwhelming tendency to report numbers in bulk – latrines built, tons of food distributed, school rehabilitated – without knowing who used those latrines, who ate the food and who went to school.”

Valerie Amos, United Nations Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) points to three sub-groups of adolescents that are particularly at risk in disasters and emergencies. Two out of the three categories are girls:

- Very young adolescents (10-14 years), especially girls, are at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse because of their dependence, lack of power, and their lack of participation in decision-making processes.
- Pregnant adolescent girls, particularly those under 16, are at increased risk of obstructed labour, a life-threatening obstetric emergency that can develop when the immature pelvis is too small to allow the passage of a baby through the birth canal. Emergency obstetric care services are often unavailable in crisis settings, increasing the risk of morbidity and mortality among adolescent mothers and their babies.
- Marginalised adolescents, including those who are HIV-positive, those with disabilities, non-heterosexual adolescents, indigenous groups and migrants, may face difficulties accessing services because of stigma, prejudice, culture, language and physical or mental limitations. They are also at risk of increased poverty and sexual exploitation and abuse because of their lack of power and participation.



In a disaster, the disruption of families and of health services may leave adolescents without access to the information and services they need about sexual and reproductive health. For girls and young women, this is precisely the time when their situation and their age and sex puts them most at risk of unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.

¹⁷ Haver, Jacquelyn. 'Research for Plan International, 'Because I am a Girl' Report 2013: Girls' Experiences with Disasters in Rizal Province, Philippines.' January 2013.

'It's not easy when you are hungry' – adolescent girls and sexual exploitation and abuse

“The world has done a poor job of recognising gender-based violence and/or exploitation in camps. It still occurs and even if there are mechanisms to report these abuses, many times beneficiaries aren't aware of their rights or there isn't a proper process set up for follow-up.”

Jeni Klugman, Director of Gender and Development, World Bank

When disaster drives poor adolescent girls and their families further into poverty, often their only option is to sell the only asset they have left – their bodies. A study by Human Rights Watch in Haiti's camps after the earthquake found a number of women and girls who were selling sex because they had no alternative to feed themselves and their children.

“You have to eat,” said Gheslaine, who lives in a camp in Croix-de-Bouquets, in Haiti. “People will try to survive the way they can. Women have relationships with men so they can feed their children. That happens a lot. My daughter is 12 and does not have friends in the camps, because it happens that even girls are pressured to have sex for things. I don't work. I don't have parents to help. So, for around a dollar, you have sex just for that. Unfortunately, women sometimes get pregnant, but if we had access to planning, we'd protect ourselves... It's not good to do prostitution, but what can you do?”¹⁸

Primary research for this report on the longer-term effects of Typhoon Ondoy in 2009 in the Philippines found adolescent girls struggling with similar problems. Anna, 13, said: *“It's hard, others have nothing to eat, and they embrace being involved in bad acts just to have something to eat, you don't know what to do or who to talk to when that happens.”*¹⁹

In many societies sexual abuse and violence is a taboo subject. Rape brings shame on the girl, and even in richer countries, judges and the judicial system may blame the victim rather than the rapist.

In Tamil Nadu, India, after the tsunami, many young women like this one did not dare report what had happened to her for fear of being socially outcast: *“I am 17 years old. In the relief camp when I was sleeping in the night I was raped. I did not know what had happened to me. I do not know the face of the man. I had heavy bleeding. I did not share this with anyone. Now I see some disturbances in my body and when my mother took me to hospital I was told I am pregnant.”*²⁰

In Haiti, Human Rights Watch found that many women and girls did not ask for help following a rape after the earthquake because they were ashamed to report what had happened. Mary, 15, waited eight days before telling an adolescent cousin about being raped, and then only told her because she knew the cousin had been through the same experience: *“Before I talked to her about my rape, I was really shy but I told myself that she was raped so I can talk to her about my situation.”*²¹

Disasters may also lead to an increase in child marriage. Research in Somaliland, Bangladesh and Niger found that child marriage is often perceived by families as a protective measure and used as a community response to crisis.²²

“Lots of girls here suffer. At the age of 13, they are married and taken out of school. They are made pregnant because the family have no money so they sell the girls for food and they have no money for dowries. Girls at 13 get fistula²³ and often die.”

Zabium and Idie, 15, from Niger²⁴

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch. “‘Nobody Remembers Us’”: Failure to Protect Women's and Girls' Right to Health and Security in Post-Earthquake Haiti.' USA: Human Rights Watch, 2011. ¹⁹ Jacquelyn Haver for Plan, 2013. ²⁰ People's Report. 'Violence against women in the post-tsunami context: India, the Maldives, Puntland [Somalia], Sri Lanka, and Thailand.' Chennai: People's Report and Action Aid India, 2007. ²¹ Human Rights Watch, 2011 ²² World Vision. 'Untying the Knot: Exploring Early Marriage in Fragile States.' UK: World Vision, March 2013. ²³ A rupture between the birth canal and bladder or rectum, caused by prolonged obstructed birth, resulting in incontinence. More common in young pregnant women whose bodies are not yet fully developed for birth. ²⁴ Interview with Jean Casey, Project Coordinator: 'Because I am a Girl' Report, Plan International. Niger, 2012.

Despite the fact that international conventions, signed by many countries, proclaim that child marriage is a violation of human rights, it is still widespread.^{25,26} One report found that out of 16 countries, 11 recorded more than half the young women as being married before they were 18.²⁷ And some girls are married even younger than this – a 2012 report estimated that 1.5 million girls under the age of 15 are married each year.²⁸

Giving your goat to your neighbour: adolescent marriage in the food crises in the Sahel²⁹

The Sahel region has faced a series of major food crises. Research carried out for this report in Niger found two opposing trends in relation to child marriage in times of crisis.

Out of the 135 adolescent girls aged between 12 and 19 interviewed during focus group discussions, 64 per cent were already married and 39 per cent already had children. The average age of marriage was 14.

But the situation is complex: the food crises have opposite effects on child marriage in different communities. In Tillaberi and a part of Dosso, the crises seemed to reduce child marriage. In Maradi, they seem to have increased it. This may be related to ethnicity – the Haoussa and the Peuls, who live in Maradi, often marry girls very young, while it is less common for the Zarma, who live in Tillaberi and parts of Dosso, to do so.

In the Tillaberi region, a focus group with eight girls said that food crises slowed down child marriages. One girl said: *“In times of food crisis, you have nothing to eat; your parents have nothing to eat; and your neighbours have nothing to eat. If you give your daughter in marriage to another member of the community who is in the same position as you, you risk losing out, because the man to whom you gave your girl is as poor as you. He will marry your daughter but what is sure is that she will return to your house to look for food. It is as if you had sold your goat to your neighbour because you do not have anything to feed it and it keeps returning every day to your house to eat.”*

The research found that the food crises delayed the age of marriage for young men because they could not afford a wife.

On the other hand, in Maradi and parts of Dosso the food crises seemed to increase the numbers of girls marrying young. One of the participants in a focus group discussion said: *“If you have a big family with a lot of girls and you do not have anything to eat and feed your children and a rich man comes and says to you that he likes one of your daughters, what are you supposed to do? Do you say ‘no’ to him and watch your children die or do you accept and he goes with your daughter and takes care of her and in addition he gives you a lot of money?”*

Parents in the communities of Maradi also say that the lack of money is one of the factors that compel parents to marry their daughters young. In contrast with boys, who can emigrate to look for work abroad and send money to their families, girls are a burden because even if they help with the domestic chores, they need to be fed in times of famine. One of the parents to Kaiwa, in the department of Tessaoua, summarises it in the following terms: *“If you refuse to give your daughter for marriage while she is still young and beautiful, when the famine arrives, she will be ready to do anything to find food to eat. If you do not have anything to feed her, she risks bringing shame to the family. As the head of the family, you have the responsibility to preserve your offspring and the honour of your children; in this case, if you see a man who has the means to take care of your daughter, it is better to give her to him and to be sure that she will live as a good Muslim.”*

²⁵ United Nations. ‘The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.’ United Nations, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm> (last accessed 15 May 2013) ²⁶ The Office of Gordon and Sarah Brown. ‘Out of wedlock, into school: combating child marriage through education. A review by Gordon Brown.’ The Office of Gordon and Sarah Brown, 2012. ²⁷ The Office of Gordon and Sarah Brown, 2012. Citing: ICF International. ‘MEASURE DHS.’ Demographic Health Surveys (most recent survey). ²⁸ The Office of Gordon and Sarah Brown, 2012 ²⁹ Oumar Basse, Yssa and Natalie Lucas. ‘Protection of Adolescent Girls and Boys in the Sahel Food Crises: General Report.’ Commissioned for the ‘Because I am a Girl’ Report. Plan International, January 2013.

‘Send your girls to school’ – the importance of education

“My message to the women in Congo, in the Sahel, everywhere is: send your girls to school. This is the best you can do for their future.”

Kristalina Georgieva, European Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response³⁰

“A generation without education is doomed. We need to be heard and to participate, we need a future. We have a right to education and we want to go to school.”

Betty, 17, displaced young woman, northern Uganda³¹

Much has been made of the empowering nature of education for girls. It gives them the ability to become active citizens and the possibility of more choice in their lives. It means that as adults they are more likely to earn a living that can help lift their families out of poverty. It also makes it more likely that their children will survive childhood and be better educated themselves. It is the reason why 15-year-old schoolgirl Malala Yousufzai, from Pakistan, was prepared to risk her life so that girls could be educated.³²

Thankfully, in many countries, increasing numbers of girls are now going to school. However, during an emergency, education is often disrupted, sometimes permanently. And yet it is at such times that education is particularly important. “Education brings stability, normality and routine into a child’s life, which is absolutely essential, especially when they are displaced,” said Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.³³

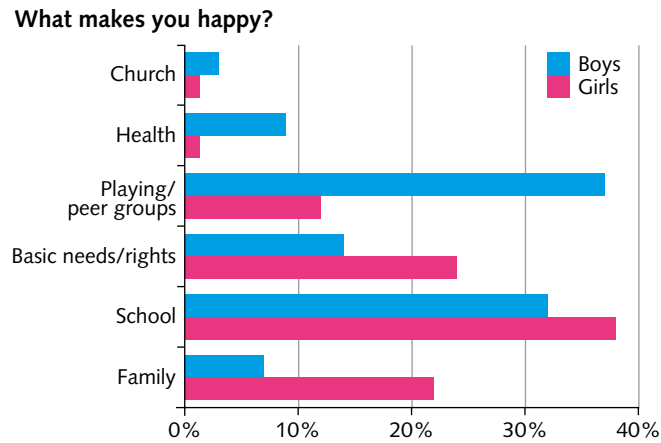
The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) notes three ways in which education can benefit adolescent girls in disasters:³⁴

- 1 It can provide physical protection. When a girl is in a safe learning environment, she is less likely to be sexually or economically exploited or exposed to other risks, such as child marriage.
- 2 It can offer a psychosocial safe space that helps girls make sense of what is happening around them. It can provide a sense of routine and longer-term benefits for the promotion of the right and responsibilities of children.
- 3 It can be the vehicle for the communication of life-saving messages: schools may act as hubs for communicating messages on hand-washing, reducing the risk of disease, how to avoid HIV infection and how to access healthcare and food in an emergency.



³⁰ Plan International. ‘Girls’ Rights Gazette.’ Plan International, 11 October 2012, <http://www.plan-eu.org/content/uploads/2012/10/Girls-Rights-Gazette-text-only-version.doc> (last accessed 15 May 2013). ³¹ Women’s Refugee Commission. ‘Adolescent Girls.’ Women’s Refugee Commission, <http://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/programs/adolescent-girls> (last accessed 15 May 2013). ³² Barr, Robert. ‘Malala Yousufzai Shooting: Pakistani Teen Recuperating From Taliban Attack.’ Huffington Post, 19 October 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/19/malala-yousufzai-shooting_n_1986127.html?utm_hp_ref=malala-yousufzai (last accessed 23 April 2013). ³³ United Nations. ‘Education brings stability, normalcy and routine into a child’s life (Radhika Coomaraswamy).’ United Nations, 18 March 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/> ³⁴ INEE. ‘Gender Equality in and through Education: INEE Pocket Guide to Gender.’ Geneva: INEE, 2010.

A study in West and Central Africa on the impact of war, HIV and other high-risk situations found that in answer to the question, “What makes you happy?” the most commonly-cited answer from all the children was “participation in school”.³⁵ This was the case for both girls and boys, with girls in fact arguing the case more strongly than the boys. The authors said: “It appears that the simple fact of being registered for the school, having one’s fees paid, receiving text books and doing well in exams, is a source of wellbeing for children.”



HAYMANOT’S STORY³⁶

Haymanot lives in rural Ethiopia. Her story illustrates the cumulative effects of drought that can cause girls to drop out of school.

In 2008, Haymanot was 12 and living with her aunt. She went to school in a nearby town. But then her mother became ill, and she went home to look after her and her younger brother and sister. Because her mother could no longer work, the family income dropped and they had very little to eat. Initially Haymanot went to school in the afternoons and worked in the mornings. But then her sister became ill as well. At the same time there was a drought in the area and crops failed. Her mother explains: “There was drought all over the community. God didn’t give us rain and there was no grass, no crops from the land. We were short of food.”

As a result, Haymanot had to drop out of school and go to work in a stone-crushing factory. She said it was her own decision but that: *“I feel very bad because I am not going to school and my mother is sick.”* Her mother also recognised that it was not good for Haymanot to drop out of school: *“By stopping her from [going to] school, I know that I am disrupting her future opportunities.”*

Then Haymanot herself got malaria, and became ill with diarrhoea, vomiting and fever, exacerbated by her workload at home and at the factory. Life was very difficult, and eventually Haymanot and her mother decided that although she was only 15, getting married would provide security and protection as the family were in such a difficult situation. Her husband, chosen by her family, is a government employee. She has been able to stop work in the factory.

Haymanot’s life is a hard one. But her story also illustrates her resourcefulness. Her hard work and robust approach also enhanced her reputation in their community. Her mother said: *“Some people who saw her always working admired her and say: ‘How did she manage to work and withstand such hardship at this age?’”*

Today, Haymanot says that her life has improved, and she hopes to delay having children and go back to school next year – if her husband will allow it.

³⁵ Morgan, Jenny and Alice Behrendt. ‘Silent Suffering: The psychosocial impact of war, HIV and other high-risk situations on girls and boys in West and Central Africa’. Plan International. 2009. ³⁶ Based on Portela, Orgando, Maria Jose and Kirrily Pells (forthcoming 2013). ‘I am dependent on my children’s support’: risk and protective factors for children experiencing shocks.’ In: Boyden, J and M Bourdillon (Eds.). ‘Growing up in Poverty: Findings from Young Lives.’ Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. ³⁷ Naomi Alfini, Becky Marshall and Ravi Karkara. ‘Strengthening Participation of Girls and Boys in Tsunami Response Programme: a workshop report.’ Save the Children, 2005. ³⁸ Correspondence with Fabian Böckler, Disaster Risk Management Officer at Plan Germany. See Also: Geere, J A, P R Hunter and P Jagals. ‘Domestic water carrying and its implications for health: a review and mixed methods pilot study in Limpopo Province, South Africa.’ Environ Health 9, no. 52 (26 August 2010), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20796292> ³⁹ Adolescent Girls and Emergencies Online Survey, Research Conducted By The ‘Because I am a Girl’ Report Team, 2013. ⁴⁰ Interview with Jean Casey, Project Coordinator: ‘Because I am a Girl’ Report, Plan International. El Salvador, 2012. ⁴¹ Jean Casey, El Salvador, 2012. ⁴² Bachelet, Michelle. Commenting on the ‘Humanitarian Response Index 2011: Addressing the Gender Challenge.’ DARA, <http://daraint.org/humanitarian-response-index/humanitarian-response-index-2011/> (last accessed June 6, 2013). In March 2013 Michelle Bachelet resigned from her position as Executive Director of UN Women to run for a second term as President of Chile.

Part of the solution: adolescent girls’ participation

There are many examples of adolescent girls who have shown courage, wisdom and initiative in the face of disaster, supporting their families, and even saving lives. These stories are unusual not because they are rare occurrences, but because they are rarely told either by the humanitarian community or by the media. This silence is directly related to wider gender discrimination – for example, it often helps to have women around if adolescent girls are to be encouraged to speak up, but in disaster work, there are few women in positions of any authority.

If adults do not listen to children, girls and boys of all ages, during disasters, then mistakes may be made. To give one example: “In relief and reconstruction efforts after the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat, India, that killed over 11,000 people, a number of the structures to improve children’s lives were found to be dangerous because they had not been properly considered from a child-centred perspective. The project put glass panes in windows that could be easily removed and broken by curious children, they built playgrounds that were dangerous, installed toilets with flushers that children couldn’t reach, and that required water children’s families didn’t have.”³⁷ Similarly, camp organisers issued water containers that, with a capacity of 20 or even 50 litres, were too heavy for girls to carry when full. Nobody had thought to check with the girls themselves, although collecting water is a task that usually falls to the girls in a family.³⁸

In our online survey, respondents from the different clusters said that ‘meaningful consultation with adolescent girls’ was low, at its highest in the water and sanitation cluster (47 per cent) and at its lowest in the protection cluster (26.8 per cent).³⁹ And yet 83 per cent of respondents identified this as an important priority in humanitarian planning and programming.

When girls fully participate, as Francisco Soto, disaster risk management adviser, explains, things begin to change: “This [Disaster Risk Reduction] training, which started out as a workshop when they [the young people] were 12, opened up a pathway to a longer-term positive community development change. Now young people, and particularly young girls, are understood as capable leaders of their community. The young women participate just as much as the young men. In fact, often the young women participate more; they are first to raise their hands, they speak out more. They have courage. This is an indicator that young women are moving forward and they know they have the same rights as the guys.”⁴⁰

“For me, in my personal life, the training has helped me in various ways. It has helped my self-esteem, it has helped me not to feel less than other people because I am a young mother... and I know about my rights, how to defend my rights and how to prevent them from being abused.”

María Elena, 18, El Salvador⁴¹

Simply surviving an earthquake, flood, or drought is not the sole aim of humanitarian work. It must also be a priority for the humanitarian and development communities to ensure that those who survive, particularly the most vulnerable, have the support they need to come to terms with their loss and trauma, and have the resources they need to rebuild their lives as well as to prepare for future crises.

As far as adolescent girls are concerned, this is not happening. Evidence from primary research demonstrates that the humanitarian and development communities are failing to address the needs of adolescent girls. They are failing to ensure they have the knowledge, skills and resources to be able to survive the impact of a potential flood, drought, or earthquake. They are failing to provide for their needs when they are exposed to greater risks in the aftermath of a disaster. Girls who are healthy and educated can go on to be leaders for response and recovery within their communities. But girls who are forced to leave school early, who become ill, who cannot get access to contraception when they need it, who fall pregnant too young, or are forced to sell their bodies to survive, face potentially disastrous consequences that will affect them not just in the disaster period, but for the rest of their lives.

‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ update

The ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study, now in its seventh year, is following 142 girls living in nine countries around the world – Benin, Togo, Uganda, Cambodia, Vietnam, Philippines, El Salvador, Brazil and the Dominican Republic. The study uses interviews and focus group discussions with relatives and community members to provide a detailed picture of the reality of the girls’ lives. Born during 2006, they all turn seven this year.

Risk factors for girls

It is not only major events such as flood, earthquake and war – internationally recognised disasters – to which girls and young women are especially vulnerable.

The rising cost of living and the increasing risk of natural hazards is a constant worry for many of the families. Living in chronic poverty, threatened by food shortages, and poor infrastructure life is a struggle against impending personal disaster. These daily stresses are often overlooked but can have a significant impact on the ability of girls and young women to build social and economic capital, to stay alive and healthy, and to access education.

Some families are making strategic decisions that will ultimately ensure that they are less at risk. These include building strong social networks, increasing their livelihood opportunities and lessening the burden of household work on school-age girls. Many parents are aware that education is key to risk reduction, but sending their daughters to school is not always a simple matter of choice or desire. Protecting against risk can also mean limiting girls’ movement and access to education.

From an early age, girls in our study have been actively encouraged to imitate the work of their mothers and grandmothers. Now, almost all of them have regular chores to perform. Bianca, in Brazil, explains: *“I do some things in the house when I arrive from school: I sweep the floor, clean the sofa,*

make the bed, and sweep the terrace and the backyard.” Thearika’s mother, in Cambodia, told us: “She wakes up at 6 am, cleans her teeth, takes a bath by herself. She helps to take care of my small baby and then has breakfast before she walks to school. It’s about 10 minutes away. In the afternoon, she looks after her brother when he is sleeping, for around three hours.” Our research also reveals the extent of daily risk faced by girls because of these gender roles and responsibilities. In this small study, six girls have sadly died; at least two of them as a result of household accidents – one involving a cooking fire in the home, another drowned while in a nearby river, used in the place of inadequate sanitation facilities.



Girl doing homework, Brazil

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Girl with her mother, Cambodia

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Reducing risk by ‘protecting’ girls

Now that the girls are getting older and are regularly attending school, we are seeing how this increased exposure to the world outside their homes is producing concerns about the risks they face. Other studies show that parental worries about the journey to school grow as girls approach puberty, when the risk of sexual assault is perceived to be greater.

For now, most parents are concerned about their daughters having to cross busy roads or highways. Catherine’s mother, in Benin, says: “The danger is that the school is located near the road at a crossroads, and therefore it is a very busy road.” During the rainy season in El Salvador, Stephany could not get to school at all due to flooding. Her mother says: “When the waves are strong, the sea washes the street away. The cars can’t pass and the children can’t make their way along the path.”

The risk of violence is also very real for some. In Brazil, six-year-old Amanda says: *“My mother does not allow me and my sister [outside] to play with boys.”* Plan’s researchers in the area confirm that the community is unsafe; there are regular reports of robberies, muggings, gang fights and murders. Researchers commented: “Amanda’s family worries a lot about home security. They told me that they will



Girl with her mother, Benin

make the backyard wall higher and install an electric fence.” Seven-year-old Juliana in Brazil remarks: *“I don’t like the criminals in the street. I would like to be a lawyer and work in the courts to put the criminals in jail.”*

In El Salvador, many of the families taking part in the study live in constant fear for their personal safety. Some of the girls’ mothers are survivors of sexual violence. As confirmed by the older girls we interviewed this year in the Philippines, Vietnam and El Salvador, fears of sexual violence increase in times of uncertainty and disaster. This situation can often expose the gap between the dreams and expectations of girls and their families (to attend secondary school or university), and the reality (to remain in the family home until marriage).

Last year, we reported on the reflections and experiences of the girls’ mothers through a series of life history interviews. Most of these women have had some level of formal education, and, as a result, are determined that their daughters too should go to school and so have the chance of greater gender equality and a more fulfilled life. We know that this generation of mothers is committed to supporting their daughters’ right to education. It is in their determination despite the poverty and risk the families contend with, that we can begin to see a brighter future for girls.



Girl with her family, Brazil

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