

Protecting the most vulnerable children in emergencies: The case for adolescent girls

In times of crisis, children are at greater risk of abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation: they can be separated from primary caregivers, trafficked, recruited into armed forces or armed groups and experience gender-based violence (GBV) and exploitation. The strains on resources generated by emergencies also place children at risk of dropping out of school, forced into early marriage or forced into the worst forms of child labour.

The ways in which children are affected by conflict and disasters are shaped by their age and gender. Due to their age, adolescents affected by emergencies are often left behind in the international community's response to global crises and displacement.ⁱ Although boys face particular vulnerabilitiesⁱⁱ, conflict and disasters amplify and exacerbate pervasive gender inequality and oppressive cultural norms, resulting in a disproportionate impact on adolescent girls.ⁱⁱⁱ

Girls are especially at risk of human rights violations: every 10 minutes an adolescent girl dies as a result of violence,^{iv} and in some countries adolescent girls are more likely to die in childbirth than complete primary education.^v

Despite this increased vulnerability, traditional approaches to protection, education, health and livelihoods in emergencies do not account for the needs of adolescent girls as they are often not age- or gender-sensitive. They fall through the gaps as they are too young for women-specific programmes and too old for children-specific programmes, which tend to have weak gender analyses. Dedicated policies and programmes to address the needs of adolescent girls in emergencies are urgent.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Plan International UK call on the UK government to address this gap - as part of its ongoing priority to tackle violence against children - by developing, piloting and adopting a strategic framework to meet the specific needs of adolescent girls in emergencies, helping to set them on a safe path to realising their dreams and ambitions.

The realities for adolescent girls in humanitarian settings

Response to children in development and humanitarian aid tends to miss the crucial and vulnerable stage of adolescence. Adolescence is a time when girls' worlds start to shrink, when their opportunities become more limited and their vulnerabilities increase. Navigating these challenges is immensely more difficult for the more than 500 million adolescent girls living in countries affected by conflict and displacement.^{vi} Humanitarian crises rupture community and state structures and services and break up or displace families and communities, rendering adolescent girls even more vulnerable to harm. The risks that girls face in times of emergency are inter-connected and are linked to their experience of violence: the causes and consequences are intertwined, impacting on their human rights and safety.

Gender-based violence against adolescent girls

Conflict and disaster greatly increase girls' exposure to GBV, abuse and exploitation. Recent findings from DFID-funded IRC research into violence against adolescent girls found that nearly 40% of girls in IRC programmes in Ethiopia and DRC have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime and over 30% have experienced physical violence in the last 12 months. The trafficking of women and girls in conflict situations for use as sexual slaves, forced marriage and forced prostitution is also part of the wider range of sexual violence carried out against civilians during and in the aftermath of conflict.

Adolescent girls in crises also face higher risks of child early and forced marriage (CEFM).^{vii} While gender inequality is a root cause of child marriage, often in times of crisis families may be forced to consider child marriage as a strategy to cope with economic hardship and/or to shield girls from increased violence.^{viii} Drivers are frequently compounded by limited access to quality education and employment opportunities and reinforced by entrenched social norms.^{ix} CEFM locks girls into poverty and exclusion, denies them education, and increases health-related risks and GBV.

Denial of sexual and reproductive health and rights

Adolescent girls growing up and/or temporarily living in a conflict-affected country often face an increased risk of early, unprotected sexual activity - as a result of consensual sex, sexual exploitation and/or GBV.^x A girl may lack knowledge about her body, ways to maintain her health, and available health services^{xi}, as well as the power or resources to access them. This can result in unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortion, maternal mortality/morbidity, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, trauma and social isolation and a perpetuating cycle of ill-health and poverty.

Lack of access to quality and standard of education

There are 39 million out of school children and adolescents living in conflict and disaster affected countries.^{xii} Girls in conflict-affected contexts are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than girls in more peaceful settings.^{xiii} Yet girls are not safe in school either: where a girl is still in school, she routinely faces safety risks, including violence, harassment, and abduction inside the classroom and on the way to and from school. She might also face violence in the home as well as pervasive harmful gender norms and practices that devalue girls' education. Moreover, because emergencies often render schools inaccessible and structurally unsound, and those that are operational often do not provide sufficient sanitation facilities for menstrual hygiene management, many girls drop out of school during crises never to return. Pregnant girls^{xiv}, young mothers and girls with disabilities face particular barriers accessing education. For adolescent girls, the ability to remain in education is particularly important to prevent violence, CEFM, child labour, trafficking.

Economic insecurity

Lack of access to quality education (including secondary education) and discrimination render girls with no access to resources, opportunities and skills to be economically independent. This in turn, especially when combined with economic shocks experienced by families in times of crisis, can result in families being forced to adopt negative coping strategies, placing adolescent girls at heightened risk of being forced out of school and subject to violence, CEFM, abuse and exploitation.

Current efforts fail to reach adolescent girls in emergencies

It is the responsibility of political and humanitarian leaders to address barriers faced by girls, yet current responses are inadequate and regularly fail to take a holistic response to adolescent girls' needs. Numerous current global policy frameworks, agreements and global initiatives relate to the protection of adolescent girls. These include the *Call to Action on Protection from Gender-based Violence in Emergencies*, the *Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action*, the *Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children* and *Alliance 8.7*, which have all been supported and championed by DFID and the UK government. However, none provide a comprehensive, gender and age sensitive plan of action for adolescent girls in humanitarian contexts.

Adolescent girls are often missed by interventions targeting adult women and by gender- and age-blind interventions aimed at children: they are often too young for services targeted at women, too old for child-friendly programmes or are unable to access mixed-gender spaces.^{xv} When grouped with older children, young adolescents are often especially overlooked as older adolescents and youth take the lead. When addressed as part of the wider groups of all children aged from 0 to 18 years old, priority is often placed on the younger age group as they are seen to need greater protection.^{xvi}

Furthermore, the humanitarian system's failure to address the gendered impacts of crises further impacts on adolescent girls' lives.^{xvii} Attempts to address their specific needs are often piecemeal with little consideration for the unique challenges they face during their adolescent years. The few programmes that do seek to support adolescent girls often offer siloed support in particular areas, failing to recognise that the causes and consequences of each of the infringements of adolescent girls' human rights are intertwined. Programmes for girls also often fail to engage with key figures in a girl's life – including men and boys as peers, parents or power holders – and do not seek to involve them in challenging harmful norms and practices or transform gender relations.

A new comprehensive approach for adolescent girls

The IRC and Plan International UK believe that in order to tackle violence against children in emergencies in a comprehensive manner, meeting the specific needs of adolescent girls is crucial and requires specific policy and practice solutions. A comprehensive, multi-sectoral, gender-transformative approach is needed to reach all aspects of girls' lives. Donors, UN agencies and NGOs working on strengthening the resilience of communities, reducing the risks of disasters, and in humanitarian response must find a better way to address girls' rights and needs as 'core business,' rather than an add-on to programmes targeted at other groups.

Case study: [US Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls](#)

In March 2016, the US government launched its first Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls to address challenges related to adolescent girls' safety, health, and education and to ensure they are socially and economically empowered, and free from violence and discrimination. It brings together six agencies: the State Department, the United States Agency for International Development, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the Peace Corps, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Agriculture

The Strategy sets out the following guiding principles:

1. Focus on adolescent girls as direct beneficiaries and active participants
2. Develop locally informed strategies adapted to unique contexts
3. Adopt a holistic, multi-sectoral, comprehensive approach
4. Rely on evidence-based interventions

The US government intends to integrate advancing the rights and empowerment of adolescent girls into its operations, including in policy development, strategic and budget planning, staff training and capacity building, implementation of policies and programs, and monitoring and evaluation of results. It also recognises throughout the strategy and its main objectives the additional challenges adolescent girls face in humanitarian settings. With a new US government in place, the implementation of this Strategy and the leadership it required to be successful, are under threat.

In this approach, adolescent girls must be given the tools and space to voice their opinions and concerns, and the agency to implement solutions as key actors, rather than bystanders in their own protection and development.

The UK government has taken great strides to tackle GBV in emergencies and combat forms of GBV affecting girls (e.g. female genital mutilation and CEFM). Looking forward, the UK should ensure their efforts to tackle violence against children prioritise addressing the needs of girls. The UK could leverage these efforts to become a global leader on protecting and empowering girls through dedicated policy and funding commitments towards strong, positive outcomes for adolescent girls in emergencies. In order to achieve this vision, we believe the UK government should develop an overarching strategic framework for meeting the rights and needs of adolescent girls in emergencies.

Developing an Adolescent Girls in Emergencies Strategic Framework: Recommendations for the UK government

A specific Adolescent Girls in Emergencies Strategic Framework (Strategy) should articulate a Theory of Change and a clear plan of action for achieving better outcomes for adolescent girls in emergencies. It should ensure that adolescent girls' needs and barriers are addressed holistically, through gender-transformative approaches, and that they are no longer falling through the gaps of siloed policy and practice.

The Framework should encourage a comprehensive approach, recognising the interdependence of the risk factors and barriers within girls' lives: if she feels safe to attend school or is encouraged to complete

her studies, if she is able to transition from school to a decent job, if she can control if and when she has children or marries, if she can decide a future of her own without fear of retribution, or if she can access services after suffering violence, she will enjoy all her rights and fulfil her potential.

The Adolescent Girls in Emergencies Strategic Framework should ensure that DFID and its partners:

1. Adopt a comprehensive ‘whole girl’ approach

The Framework, supported by a Theory of Change and an Action Plan for implementation, should incentivise collaboration between interventions focused on protection, education, health and economic wellbeing, with emphasis on transforming the negative power imbalances and harmful gender norms that give rise to gender inequalities. The Framework should promote a life-cycle approach, tailoring interventions according to the specific needs of girls of different ages.

2. Bring all relevant government departments and sectors together

The Framework should be developed and led by DFID, in partnership with other relevant departments working in humanitarian settings, including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence for their work on modern slavery. It should include links to and learning from Disaster Risk Reduction, climate change adaptation and resilience activities, continuing to support the implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction with the participation of adolescent girls. The Framework should also ensure meaningful engagement with civil society and have an interdepartmental coordination mechanism to provide leadership, decision making and accountability.

3. Improve data collection and dissemination on the needs of adolescent girls

The Framework should require DFID and its partners to improve data collection and dissemination to assess the specific needs of adolescent girls, including in needs assessments and UN Strategic Response Plans. Data should be disaggregated by sex and age at a minimum. Quantitative and qualitative data should be used to inform and adapt interventions that target adolescent girls, with a focus on the most vulnerable, marginalised and excluded.

4. Promote and protect adolescent girls’ rights and ensure girls’ participation

The Framework should be based on and aim to achieve the full realisation, promotion and protection of girls’ human rights, in line with the Core Humanitarian Standards.^{xviii} It should ensure girls’ participation in all stages of emergency response is systematically included in DFID programmes. These efforts should include adequate investment in capacity building (of DFID/FCO staff, partners and girls themselves) and adolescent-friendly feedback and accountability mechanisms.

5. Work with local actors to respond to adolescent girls’ needs

The Framework should be long term and adequately resourced with emphasis on strengthening the capacity of local actors, particularly local women’s rights and youth-led/girl-led organisations, empowering them to effectively respond to girls’ needs in times of crisis. Predictable, transparent and accessible funding should be provided on a multi-year basis to ensure sustainability and enable programmes to take longer-term approaches to social norm and behavioural change.

6. Engage men and boys as allies in transforming harmful gender relations

The Framework must recognise the critical role of men and boys in preventing GBV and creating an environment in which girls can realise their rights. It should encourage a transformative approach, working in partnership with men, women, girls, and boys to shift harmful norms and attitudes.

7. Have practical means to measure progress and accountability

The Framework and accompanying Action Plan should include goals, objectives and indicators with a monitoring and evaluation framework, in addition to a regular reporting mechanism through which all actors helping to implement the Framework can report progress.

8. Pilot and continue to refine the Framework based on evidence and learning

DFID should develop the Strategic Framework and Theory of Change in partnership with civil society and pilot it in at least three different humanitarian settings. DFID should work with and

support the meaningful participation of adolescent girls and civil society to ensure that the learnings from these pilots are fed back into the refinement and finalisation of the Framework.

The IRC's work with adolescent girls

The mission of the IRC is to help people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover and regain control of their future. All our programmes are designed to improve people's health, safety, education, economic wellbeing and ability to positively influence the decisions that affect their lives. Our work with adolescent girls brings both a gender and an age lens to this approach, and by working with girls instead of on behalf of girls, the IRC's programmes are driven and led by girls in a way that empowers them long into the future. We focus on addressing the root causes of violence, increasing opportunities for girls, and providing high quality services and support to those who have experienced violence. We engage girls, their parents and caregivers, and community leaders to combat harmful norms and practices such as CEFM, FGM, and denial of education. In 2016, IRC's dedicated programmes for adolescent girls have reached nearly half a million girls, and IRC's child protection and case management services for children and GBV survivors benefited over 27,000 girls.

Plan International UK's work with adolescent girls

Plan International strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls. We adopt a child-centred approach, putting children and young people at the heart of everything we do. We work in both development and emergency contexts, seeking to promote the rights of all children, particularly girls, to health, education, protection, and participation. Together with girls and boys, their families, communities, organisations and local governments, we work to tackle the root causes of poverty and gender inequality. We support communities to develop the structures and skills they need to provide a safe and healthy environment in which all girls can learn, lead, decide and thrive.

ⁱ Plan International, [State of the World's Girls 2013. In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters](#), 2013

ⁱⁱ These include greater risk of drowning, injury or death due to landmines and explosive remnants of war, conscription into armed groups, being killed or wounded during fighting, and certain forms of child labour.

ⁱⁱⁱ Research conducted in 141 countries found that boys generally received preferential treatment over girls in rescue efforts (See: 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). Furthermore, in some recent disasters, up to 80% of lives lost or of those displaced were women and girls (see Plan International. [Weathering the Storm: Adolescent Girls & Climate Change](#), 2011)

^{iv} Women's Refugee Commission, [I'm Here: Adolescent Girls in Emergencies](#), 2014

^v An adolescent girl in South Sudan is three times more likely to die in childbirth than to complete primary school. UN OCHA, [Humanitarian Needs Overview, South Sudan](#), 2016

^{vi} Women's Refugee Commission, [I'm Here: Adolescent Girls in Emergencies](#), 2014

The World Bank notes that 95% of refugees and internally displaced live in developing countries, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview>

^{vii} Child, early and forced marriage of Syrian girls in Jordan nearly doubled in the two years between 2012 and 2014: International Rescue Committee, [Are We Listening? Acting on Our Commitments to Women and girls Affected by the Syrian Conflict](#), 2014

^{viii} Girls Not Brides, [Child Marriage in Humanitarian Crises](#), 2016

^{ix} Plan International, [A Girl's Right to Say No to Marriage](#), 2013

^x Pregnancy is one of the prominent reasons for adolescent girls to drop out of school alongside GBV, CEFM, and poverty. Plan International, [State of the World's Girls 2013. In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters](#), 2013

^{xi} In an online survey of humanitarian SRH actors working in IDP camps and shelters, only 54 percent prioritized the provision of, and access to, maternal and neonatal health services of pregnant adolescent girls. In: Plan International, [State of the World's Girls 2013. In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters](#), 2013, p39

^{xii} In 2015, 462 million children and adolescents were living in countries affected by conflict and disaster. Around 75 million children and adolescents in fragile settings had their education disrupted; 39 million were girls. In: Theirworld, [39 million girls are at risk: are humanitarian responses doing enough?](#), 2016, p10

^{xiii} United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, [EFA Global Monitoring Report, 'Humanitarian Aid for Education: Why it matters and why more is needed'](#), Policy Paper 21, UNESCO, Paris, June 2015, p. 3.

^{xiv} In Sierra Leone, where 62 percent of girls aged 15-24 are literate according to the latest government health survey, girls who dropped out of school during the Ebola crisis and then became pregnant were barred from re-entering mainstream education by the government after schools reopened. In: Theirworld, [39 million girls are at risk: are humanitarian responses doing enough?](#), 2016, p12.

^{xv} Plan International, [State of the World's Girls 2013. In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters](#), 2013

^{xvi} Plan International, [A Time of Transition: Adolescents in Humanitarian Settings](#), 2016

^{xvii} GAPS, GADN and InterAction (incl IRC and Plan International), [Position on the World Humanitarian Summit](#), 2015, and IRC, [Are We There Yet? Progress and challenges in ensuring life-saving services and reducing risks to violence for women and girls in emergencies](#), 2015

^{xviii} [Core Humanitarian Standard](#)