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Report

Addressing the needs of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings

Monday 2 – Wednesday 4 July 2018 | WP1627

In partnership with:





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Globally, 50% of the 1.4 billion people living in countries affected by crises and fragility are under the age of 20.¹ Adolescent girls (aged 10-19) are profoundly impacted by humanitarian crises, which can exacerbate inequalities, disrupt access to essential services, and expose girls to new risks and vulnerabilities. They are particularly vulnerable when it comes to their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)², sexual and gender based violence (SGBV)³, female genital mutilation⁴, forced marriage⁵, and other harmful practices. Furthermore, today's increasingly protracted humanitarian situations mean that some adolescent girls can remain in crisis settings or forced displacement for up to 20 years⁶, and well into adulthood, which can impede their education, health, and livelihood opportunities.

Over the last decade, there has been a significant rise in global rhetoric, initiatives, guidelines, tools to address the health, rights, and wellbeing of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings. From the [World Humanitarian Summit](#) and the [Global Compact on Refugees](#), to the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) and the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), the world has witnessed a surge of new commitments and targets to meet the needs of adolescent girls. Similarly, the availability of new tools such as the [Minimal Initial Services Package](#) (MISP) for Reproductive Health in Emergencies, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) [Gender Policy](#) and [Gender Handbook](#), and the [IASC Gender with Age Marker](#) (GAM) have sharpened focus on the interventions needed to improve youth- and gender-sensitive humanitarian action.

¹ [OECD](#), 2015

² Demand for the full range of contraceptive options, including long-acting methods, is present in humanitarian settings, and evidence shows that women will use them if available and of reasonable quality. For example, nearly three quarters of pregnant Syrian refugee women surveyed in Lebanon wished to prevent future pregnancy, and more than one half did not desire their current pregnancy. ([Benage et al.](#), 2017)

³ Research shows that adolescent girls face staggering rates of violence in humanitarian settings. For example, 45% of adolescent girl in Ethiopia and 37% in the DRC reported experiencing sexual violence in their lifetime. In the past 12 months alone, 52% of adolescent girls in Ethiopia and 61% in the DRC reported experiencing at least one form of sexual, physical, or emotional violence. ([A Safe Place to Shine](#), International Rescue Committee/DFID/Columbia University, 2017)

⁴ WHO estimates that more than 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone FGM, and there are 3 million girls at risk of the practice every year ([WHO](#), 2016). Countries like Somalia and Sudan that are currently experiencing protracted humanitarian crises also face some of the highest rates of FGM – at 98% and 88% of girls and women affected, respectively ([UNICEF](#), 2013)

⁵ Nine of the ten countries with the highest child marriage rates are considered fragile or extremely fragile settings. Seven out of the twenty countries with the highest child marriage rates currently face some of the largest humanitarian crises. ([Girls Not Brides](#), 2017)

⁶ 11.6 million refugees, representing some two-thirds of all refugees, were in protracted refugee situations at the end of 2016. Of this number, 4.1 million were in a situation lasting 20 years or more. ([UNHCR](#), 2016)

Nevertheless, the international community still falls short in systematically prioritising adolescent girls in humanitarian settings. When crises strike, girls lack safe and equitable access to humanitarian assistance. Where targeted programming for adolescent girls does exist, holistic, multi-sector collaboration is still required across every stage of adolescence. Crucially, adolescent girls – and the local civil society organisations (CSOs) that support them – still need greater control over humanitarian action, resources, and decision-making.

The aim of the Wilton Park meeting was to bring together diverse partners across 28 countries from INGOs, youth organisations, donors, CSOs, multilaterals, and experts from the field to explore effective multi-sectoral policies, programmes, and investments that can better meet the needs of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings. Discussions focused on how to build a more girl-responsive humanitarian system, the importance of working across the development-humanitarian nexus, opportunities for multi-sector collaboration, and the critical role adolescent girls and local CSOs can play in tailoring and scaling up girl-sensitive humanitarian action for greater reach and impact.

Key points

- **Transformative change within the international humanitarian system is needed to drive girl-sensitive humanitarian action.** Within international organisations, leadership and field teams could benefit from capacity building opportunities to better understand the specific needs of girls in humanitarian settings, and their individual accountabilities to this work. Putting girls at the centre of humanitarian programme design, implementation, research and evaluation, and ensuring the voices of girls and young women are heard was a clear takeaway. In addition, organisations must identify their own power imbalances, biases, and institutional barriers to cross-sector partnership for adolescent girls. Donors can support this by financing system-wide coordination and accountability on gender; supporting research and evaluation on ‘what works’ to support adolescent- and gender-responsive programming; promoting organisational learning on more effective gender-responsive programming; and supporting field-based capacity-building to uphold existing commitments such as the SDGs, [Grand Bargain](#), and [Charter for Change](#).
- **Multi-sector collaboration, including across the development-humanitarian nexus, is required to meet the holistic needs of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings.** Experts working in education; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); protection; prevention of gender-based violence; nutrition; livelihoods; and health/SRHR, must come together with adolescent girls and their caregivers to address the interconnected needs of girls in humanitarian settings. It is also critical to invest in programming that tackles not just basic needs but also addresses adolescent girls’ psychosocial wellbeing, bodily autonomy, voice, and agency. Complementary action between development and humanitarian organisations can help share lessons learned more effectively, draw from relevant expertise in each field, and prevent duplication.

- **Transformative changes to gender norms in humanitarian crises are possible but require more agile and long-term planning.** Protracted humanitarian crises provide opportunities to transform deep-rooted gender inequalities and support girls' empowerment. Organisations and donors can help drive positive gains in gender equality by developing programmes that support girls' development trajectories, build resilience, and promote their leadership in recovery and peace processes. Programmes must also be tailored to adapt to changes throughout their life course so that girls have the resources they need to make smart and healthy decisions during crises and beyond. Stronger results can be achieved through a holistic approach that tackles barriers and manages intersectionality, considering multiple and diverse needs across ethnicity, disability, age, sexual orientation, and location, among other factors. Flexible and long-term financing for programmes benefiting adolescent girls can help enable this work.
- **When adolescent girls and their communities are engaged from start to finish in humanitarian decision-making, outcomes can better reflect their needs.** Adolescent girls must be meaningfully engaged in all humanitarian decision-making that affects their lives. Opportunities for them to contribute to programme design and implementation, policy advocacy, and research should be strengthened in a way that does not interfere with their lives. To best understand and respond to the full spectrum of challenges and opportunities facing adolescent girls, wider community engagement and consultation is also important – including with parents, men and boys, religious leaders, and other local influencers. Community engagement can help lay the foundation for girl-focused programming that responds to structural drivers of inequality and violence, gender hierarchies, and opportunities to influence change in each context.
- **Girl-focused CSOs must be engaged, financed, and consulted in humanitarian preparedness, response, and recovery efforts.** Increased power and influence must be directed to local girl-focused CSOs who understand the context, challenges, and entry points for aid delivery when a humanitarian crisis occurs. By engaging and investing in their capacities, organisations and donors can help strengthen locally-led efforts to promote community buy-in, deliver at scale more rapidly, and drive sustainable emergency response and recovery even after international actors leave. Bold new risk-sharing mechanisms and financing tools should be explored so that these CSOs are adequately equipped before, during, and after a humanitarian crisis strikes.

Build a more girl-responsive humanitarian system

Action is required at all levels of international humanitarian organisations to help advance the health, rights, and wellbeing of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings. Expertise and accountabilities on youth- and gender-sensitive humanitarian action should exist with all staff – not just with small gender-focused teams. Recommendations to strengthen institutions include:

1. **Ensuring that adolescent girls have a substantive voice in organisational governance.** This can include opportunities for adolescent girls from humanitarian settings to serve on an organisation's Board of Directors, as well as formal opportunities for girls to contribute to strategic planning and decision-making that affects their lives.

2. **Internal organisational reviews** to redress power imbalances and biases that impede effective gender-sensitive humanitarian action, particularly for adolescent girls. This can include an analysis of the gender composition of field- and headquarter-based teams, and surveys on staff perceptions of gender and SRHR. For example, widespread myths that adolescent girls neither desire nor need contraceptives and broader SRH services in emergencies must be confronted. These reviews can help inform new hiring initiatives, trainings, and internal policy amendments that foster an enabling environment for more effective girl-focused programming.
3. **Capacity-building with senior leadership** at humanitarian organisations to promote buy-in for gender-sensitive humanitarian programming, and high-level advocacy on issues tied to adolescent girls in humanitarian settings.
4. **Capacity-building with field-based teams** who work directly with communities affected by humanitarian crises, to ensure the needs of adolescent girls are prioritised at the outset of all programming. This should include the promotion of existing tools such as Rapid Gender Needs Assessments, the MISP, GAM, and others, so they are properly implemented when it matters most. Field teams must embody and act on organisational core values and could benefit from trainings to better understand how to design and implement programmes that consider all intersectional identities, such as race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, and disability. A supportive environment must be created for field-based teams to also understand and address their own personal biases towards adolescent girls.
5. **Bold new strategies, policies, and trainings** to prevent and address sexual exploitation and abuse within the humanitarian aid sector, including building up and from a zero-tolerance approach to perpetrators.

Donors can support and enable this work by:

6. **Investing in capacity-building initiatives within international humanitarian organisations**, including the leadership and field-based trainings and surveys outlined above.
7. **Requiring explicit reporting on outcomes for adolescent girls** in all humanitarian grant-making. At minimum, this starts by enforcing reporting on sex- and age-disaggregated data.
8. **Encouraging organisations to have monitoring and evaluation structures that report on learnings** – not just outcomes – so they can explore bold new initiatives with good potential to benefit adolescent girls.
9. **Supporting independent rigorous research and impact evaluations on ‘what works’** to support adolescent- and gender-responsive programming in humanitarian settings;
10. **Appointing a cross-cutting gender point-person, organisational champion, or team** to support all grant-making departments within a donor organisation. This person or team must have meaningful influence to shape investments that impact adolescent girls in humanitarian settings.

Strengthen multi-sector collaboration across the development-humanitarian nexus

Adolescent girls in humanitarian settings do not experience life in silos and issues concerning their SRHR, nutrition, protection, hygiene, education, and livelihoods are all interconnected. Programmes, policies, and investments should thus consider their holistic needs, looking at the whole girl rather than just one segment of their lives. To strengthen cross-sector collaboration and drive more comprehensive action for adolescent girls in humanitarian settings, actors should:

11. Forge deeper collaboration and coordination across the humanitarian system.

Organisations in each cluster must consult and coordinate with other sectors to ensure programmes recognize girls' multiple and competing realities. Some examples include:

- Prioritising **SRHR** in all sectors – not just health– considering the formative role a girl's ability to control her fertility can play in her health, education, psychosocial wellbeing, voice and agency, economic empowerment and long-term livelihood opportunities.
- Ensuring **education programmes in humanitarian settings** consider the multiple livelihood and protection factors that may hinder girls' access to quality education, such as early pregnancy, child marriage, menstruation, violence against schools, SGBV on the way to schools, or sexual misconduct by school staff and fellow students. Programmes that aim to keep girls in school should address these interrelated issues.
- Ensuring **female-friendly spaces** operate at times that do not compete with girls' other responsibilities, are available in spaces that do not put girls at greater risk of SGBV (including providing mobile services) and are accessible to the most marginalized girls (for example, girls with disabilities, girls who are married, girls with children, divorced adolescent girls, or girls from minority groups).
- Recognizing girls' **psychosocial needs** in every programme that directly or indirectly engages them, to promote resilience and prevent re-stigmatization.
- Ensuring **health services and distribution programmes** do not put girls at greater risk or vulnerability of SGBV; for example, organizing programmes where girls do not have to travel long distances or dangerous routes to access hygiene kits and food items.
- Ensuring that **social protection programmes** (for example, cash transfer initiatives, public works, food assistance) are designed with a gender and age/life-course lens, including referrals and linkages to complementary services.⁷

Think and act long-term

Today, some adolescent girls affected by humanitarian crises may be displaced for up to 20 years. It is thus not enough for humanitarian programmes to only meet their immediate needs – they must also prioritise girls' long-term futures. When girls' full range of hopes, aspirations, and livelihood opportunities are considered at the outset of a crisis, organisations can help positively transform gender norms and lay the foundation for longer-term gains in gender equality. Key strategies for long-term planning include:

12. **Collaboration across the development-humanitarian nexus**, as described above, to draw from existing expertise and evidence.

⁷ [Align Platform](#), 2018.

13. **Agile and flexible responses that consider the changing needs and responsibilities of girls throughout adolescence and into adulthood.** The challenges and opportunities for girls can vary greatly at different stages of adolescence. Adolescent girls can also get married and bear children during this period, at which time they and their communities may no longer view youth-friendly programmes as appropriate. Interventions for adolescent girls should thus plan and adapt to the full spectrum of life course experiences. They should also pay attention to creative approaches that can overcome adolescent girls' mobility restrictions – for example promoting online forums with peers and information sharing in contexts where internet connectivity and social media access is feasible and affordable.⁸
14. **Initial investment in SRHR programmes at the outset of a humanitarian crises** so girls can make smart and healthy decisions about their futures. Community and health provider engagement in SRHR interventions is essential to ensure programmes are safe, culturally-appropriate, and accessible.
15. **Open communication with girls about their ambitions and goals**, to help create an enabling environment for growth and resilience, not just immediate needs. Investing in girls' education and skills building provides a safe and supportive platform for girls to imagine their futures and work toward their aspirations.
16. **Investment in adolescent girls in emergency preparedness initiatives**, to help build resilience and local capacity before disasters strike.
17. **Awareness of the intersectional needs of adolescent girls across** different age groups, ethnicities, refugee or IDP status, geographies, family income levels, disability, sexual orientations, and other factors, to inform tailored responses.
18. **Flexible and long-term financing** for programmes benefiting adolescent girls is essential to enable long-term planning in the humanitarian space as well as the humanitarian-development nexus.
19. **Early engagement of, and investment in, local girl-focused CSOs**, as described below, who will remain in communities and can help lead programmes for adolescent girls well after international actors leave. When CSOs are engaged early, programme handover and exit strategies are more sustainable in the long-term.

Engage adolescent girls and their communities

Adolescent girls are experts on their lives and experiences, and must be meaningfully engaged in the humanitarian decision-making, programmes, policies, and research that affect them. Meaningful inclusion ensures programmes are tailored to their unique challenges and realities. Opportunities for engagement include:

20. **Consulting and involving adolescent girls in programme design, implementation**, and monitoring and evaluation processes so initiatives speak to their lived realities.
21. **Building and supporting girls' peer groups**, which can aid with the delivery of services, strengthen peer education and outreach initiatives, and improve the effectiveness of youth-friendly services.

⁸ Research with adolescents living in the Gaza strip shows that while all adolescents were generally permitted to access schools, mosques, and empowerment programmes run by NGOs, girls were disproportionately prohibited from entering other public spaces where they could easily access critical information that affects their lives. To circumvent these barriers, girls relied turned to television and the internet to gather the information they needed. ([GAGE](#), 2017)

22. **Involving adolescent girls in the design, collection, and dissemination of new research on humanitarian crises.** Engaging girls at all stages of research projects helps ensure studies better reflect their realities, while strengthening local research capacity. Strong examples of quantitative and qualitative participatory research exist, such as projects where adolescent girls use art and photography to capture and share their experiences with researchers. Researchers should share best practices in girl-friendly participatory research processes broadly – including at relevant academic forums and explicitly in their publications – to encourage uptake of these methods in the academic community.⁹
23. **Providing opportunities for girls’ engagement that are safe and convenient for them.** In all of the above, organisations should work with girls to understand their competing responsibilities and protection concerns that might impede their participation and effective engagement. For example, many girls in humanitarian settings already face the double burden of childcare and housework, so focus groups and peer outreach programmes must be designed around their schedules. In addition, girls’ contributions in programme and research consultations (for example, through focus groups, interviews) must be kept confidential.
24. **Donors should require girls’ engagement and involvement in all humanitarian funding** that affects their lives and allocate resources to supporting these initiatives.

At the same time, it is acknowledged that the lives of adolescent girls are deeply influenced and shaped by individual, relationship, community, and societal factors. To fully understand the social ecosystem surrounding adolescent girls in humanitarian settings, the following groups should also be engaged:

25. **Parents and guardians**, whose support and consent is usually required for the effective implementation of girl-friendly programmes. Generating buy-in from parents/guardians for girl-focused programmes, particularly tied to SRHR and GBV, can help improve girls’ access and participation. For example, resources for parents to facilitate positive conversations about sex and sexuality in refugee camps in Greece have helped de-stigmatise these conversations within some families. Engagement of **female relatives**, particularly **mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and mothers-in-law**, can be particularly important, considering the influential role they play in many girls’ lives.
26. **Religious and cultural leaders**, who can influence and shape community norms and customary rules around girls’ role in societies. For example, societal and religious rules may heavily influence a girls’ mobility, self-confidence, and uptake of services – particularly tied to SRHR. It is important to view the ways in which religion and culture can provide opportunities for girls’ empowerment, and address how they might contribute to and reinforce gender discrimination.
27. **Men and boys**, whose engagement can help create an enabling environment for gender equality and improve girls’ access and participation to girl-focused programmes. For example, efforts to involve men and boys in GBV outreach in the Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, have helped create new male allies and peers to prevent GBV among Rohingya communities. To ensure gender hierarchies are not unknowingly reinforced, male engagement activities must consult girls, acknowledge existing gender power imbalances, actively work to transform patriarchal structures, and promote girls’ leadership.

⁹ GAGE’s Participatory Research Toolkit for integrating adolescent girls’ perspectives in programming is one model that outlines participatory research tools used in Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon. These tools include fun and interactive participatory research methodologies that have shown to enable adolescents in refugee and host community settings to engage in research processes. ([GAGE](#), 2017)

28. **Other community influencers**, such as local policy-makers, CSOs (described below), celebrities, police officers, and legal authorities, who may also play a formative role in girls' lives. Influencer mapping activities should be carried out in each context to determine the most important influencers and greatest opportunities to affect change.

Unlock the full power of girl-focused CSOs

Donors and agencies now acknowledge that to get better humanitarian and development outcomes, CSOs must have increased power, influence, and funding. For example, the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit launched a new [Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action With and For Youth](#), which was supported by many partners engaged in humanitarian response. Similarly, the [Grand Bargain agreement](#) secured commitments from more than 30 of the largest humanitarian actors and donors to provide 25% of global humanitarian aid to local and national responders by 2020. Despite these commitments, currently only about [0.2%](#) of humanitarian funding goes directly to local CSOs, and even less to those led by girls and women. At this current pace, the international community will not meet the 2020 goal unless much more innovative mechanisms for funding local actors are explored.

Women-led organisations and girl-focused CSOs are agents of change in their communities, with the power and capacity to lead sustainable humanitarian responses. They understand the context, challenges, and opportunities for delivering aid, and often work across silos to meet the holistic needs of adolescent girls in their communities. When effectively engaged and supported, girl-focused CSOs can help maximise reach and impact. To unlock this potential, international organisations and humanitarian decision-makers should:

29. **Fully finance girl-focused CSOs.** CSOs in humanitarian settings need the resources to strengthen and sustain their efforts to support adolescent girls. This includes long-term and flexible financing, so these organisations are empowered to scale-up the reach and impact of existing programmes benefitting adolescent girls.
30. **Improve research on financing girl-focused CSOs:** While it is increasingly understood that more resources should be directed to local CSOs, the international community has not yet determined the best mechanisms for funding them most effectively. Improved research on financing the localisation agenda, bold risk-sharing initiatives, and greater transparency in the humanitarian grant-making infrastructure can help direct resources to the local actors that can use them best. Additional research on best practices for meaningful engagement of girl-focused CSOs at all stages of humanitarian action could also be helpful.
31. **Engage girl-focused CSOs before humanitarian emergencies strike**, to support local resilience and quicker recovery. This includes their full engagement in disaster risk reduction and emergency preparedness initiatives, which many already lead at the grassroots level.
32. **Strengthen the advocacy capacity of girl-focused CSOs** to help elevate their voices to wider audiences. There is an articulated request from CSOs to more directly engage with decision-makers and purse-holders in humanitarian contexts, so they can help shape decisions that affect their ability to operate successfully. Opportunities to engage local and international media, learn about digital advocacy, and attend relevant international forums and meetings are also important for strengthening local advocacy capacity.
33. **Reinforce locally-led activities at the outset of an emergency.** Local CSOs are often first responders to a humanitarian crises, operating well before international actors arrive. Humanitarian organisations must take every effort to strengthen their activities without unknowingly displacing local capacity (for example, through brain drain) or unnecessary duplicating existing efforts.

34. **Integrate CSO voices in long-term scale-up and exit strategies** of programmes benefitting adolescent girls. Localization is not the antithesis of programme scale-up, but rather an essential process to ensure activities are tailored to local contexts and girls' realities. Meaningfully engaging girl-focused CSOs from the start to finish of humanitarian programming can also aid with smooth programme handover and long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

The international community can and must do better to improve the health, rights, and wellbeing of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings. This work must be underpinned by efforts to enhance the collection and use of sex- and age- disaggregated data, as well as robust process and impact evaluations on what is working to accelerate change for adolescent girls, their male peers, families and communities. Nevertheless, while significant funding and research gaps remain and must be filled, we can still accelerate progress now.

Momentum towards many of the proposed solutions outlined above, can be made with a change in mindset and prioritisation, to put adolescent girls at the centre of all humanitarian action. Similarly, forging the cross-sector collaboration needed for more effective girl-focused policies and programmes begins with an openness to self-reflection, learning, collaboration, and a willingness to be held accountable for progress. Finally, stronger action and advocacy on issues like girls' SRHR, SGBV (including child marriage), education, skills building and civic and political engagement need not wait for research or funding gaps to be filled. There are many opportunities to begin this work immediately informed by existing evidence, and with an openness to adapting programming as more robust data and evidence emerges.

With bold determination, it is possible to lay the foundation for a more girl-responsive humanitarian system.

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