

FACT SHEET

Adolescent girls affected by violent conflict: Why should we care?

“Young women have distinctive experiences in armed conflict because of their age and stage in life. These experiences are also strongly determined by gender...” - World Youth Report 2005

The rights of women and girls in armed conflict need to be protected. Their active participation in conflict prevention, peace processes and post-conflict peace-building, especially at decision-making levels, must be promoted. These issues are at the heart of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, unanimously adopted in 2000.

Why look specifically at adolescent girls?

Adolescent girls, many of them mothers and heads of households, are an overlooked group within conflict-affected populations. They are crucial actors in post-conflict reconstruction and in the rebuilding of peaceful communities. There are many age, development, and social position-related differences among girls, women and adolescent girls. At the same time, it is important to recognize that there is no universal line between girlhood and womanhood; it differs greatly from context to context. Often, “adolescence” is not a phase in the life-cycle of girls who marry and/or become mothers immediately, these girls go directly from “childhood” to “womanhood”.

Why isn't more being done for adolescent girls?

Resolution 1325 calls for recognizing the unique experiences and needs of women and girls; however, there is very little in-depth consideration of the particular implications of conflict for adolescent girls. There is almost no practical movement toward involving them in peace-building processes.

“Youth” and “gender” in armed conflict straddle two somewhat parallel UN agendas, one devoted to child protection and development and the other devoted to the protection and advancement of women. While both of these agendas are urgently needed, adolescent girls tend to fall through the cracks.

(Lowicki, J., World Youth Report 2005, chapter 8, pg 173)

What do adolescent girls experience in armed conflicts?

Gender-based violence (GBV)

- In conflicts, adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence – rape, sexual slavery, mutilation, trafficking, forced prostitution, forced marriage and forced impregnation. Gender-based violence experienced during the formative adolescent years can have different lifelong impacts than violence experienced by women.

Displacement

- Being forced to flee violent conflicts can increase the vulnerability of adolescent girls to sexual abuse and exploitation. For example, the traditional responsibility of some adolescent girls in collecting firewood may become riskier in refugee camps due to longer distances between the camp and the collection site. Displacement also tends to alter social structures and support mechanisms by separating family members, and by loss of livelihood, which can increase the risk of abuse and exploitation for adolescent girls.

HIV/AIDS

- Adolescent girls may face increased exposure to HIV/AIDS transmission when they are targeted for gender-based violence. A high rate of HIV/AIDS prevalence in communities may also mean they are responsible for caring for infected family members in addition to coping with the loss of family members from both war and disease. In some situations, adolescent girls may have less access to preventive information and to treatment.

Girls in fighting forces

- Adolescent girls can be vulnerable to forced recruitment into fighting forces as combatants, cooks, porters, spies, ‘wives’ and sex slaves. The experiences and unique needs of adolescent girls who have been armed fighters are often ignored in post-conflict reconstruction, especially in Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes.

Early marriage and forced marriage

- Poverty is a key factor in war. Adolescent girls may be forced into early marriage or ‘taken as wives’ in situations of armed conflict. Adolescent girls from poorer families may be more vulnerable to forced marriage. Families sometimes marry off daughters at younger ages, to reduce the number of people depending on food, and to try to enhance security. Marriage usually means the end to education.

Forced impregnation and early childbirth

- Adolescent girls can be at risk of forced impregnation as a strategy of ethnic cleansing which seeks to forcibly change the ethnic make-up of a population. Forced impregnation and rape increase the likelihood of early childbirth, with its high risk of potential death or disability for the young mother and her infant.

Household workload

- The effects of HIV/AIDS, displacement, and deaths of family members during conflict increase the already heavy workload of adolescent girls – cooking, collecting water, gathering firewood, and minding children. Adolescent girls may also be heads of households or single mothers.

Lack of education

- These experiences often result in reduced opportunities for primary and secondary education, or informal education/livelihood development opportunities. The lack of educational opportunities can leave adolescent girls even more at risk of abuse, violence, poverty, disease and exploitation.

Adolescent girls affected by violent conflict: What can we do?

The responsibility to protect adolescent girls threatened by violent conflict is a responsibility shared by adolescent girls themselves, their communities, governments, international organizations – and ourselves. Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security provides a common moral and legal platform through which individuals, organizations, governments and international institutions can advocate for the inclusion of adolescent girls in conflict prevention, peace-building and reconstruction.

What can we do?

Recognize adolescent girls affected by armed conflict as having distinctive needs which may not be the same as women, children or adolescent boys. The distinctive needs of adolescent girls require distinctive responses – which should be a priority for program developers and policy-makers. Write a letter or email to your elected representatives urging them to prioritize women's rights and gender equality throughout international policy sectors, and to emphasize the special needs of adolescent girls.

What can governments do?

Increase human and financial resources toward women's rights monitoring and implementation with special attention to the needs and aspirations of adolescent girls. Standards set out in Resolution 1325, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Beijing Platform for Action and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa all provide a strong footing for national governments to ensure adolescent girls are protected from violence and are empowered as peacebuilders.

Specific areas for government action:

- Provide HIV/AIDS and sexual and reproductive health education to adolescent girls and boys.
- Increase protection for refugee and internally displaced adolescent girls.
- Support gender-based violence prevention programs, survivor support, clinical care and confidential reporting procedures.
- Provide girl-friendly primary and secondary education including early childhood education (ECE) and parallel formal and non-formal programs.
- Include the unique needs of adolescent girls involved in fighting forces in peace agreements and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs.

What can international organizations do?

International organizations including the United Nations should ensure their policies, programs and practices are sensitive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of adolescent girls.

Specific areas for international action:

- Enforce zero-tolerance sexual abuse and sexual exploitation policies by peacekeeping forces and humanitarian officials working in conflict situations and in refugee/IDP camps.
- Ensure international criminal justice mechanisms such as the ICC or other tribunals are responsive to adolescent girls through sensitive reporting, investigation, witness support and reparations.
- Develop gender and youth sensitive early response strategies to identify how adolescent girls may be affected by armed conflict.
- Support the participation of adolescent girls in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and reconstruction processes.

To find out more:

Gender and Peacebuilding Working Group of the
Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee
1 Nicholas St. Suite 1216
Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 7B7 Canada
Tel: 613-241-3446 Fax: 613-241-4846
Email: surendrini@peacebuild.ca
www.peacebuild.ca

Gender, Peace and Security Agendas:
Where are Girls and Young Women? (2004)
<http://action.web.ca/home/cpcc/attach/girlsywomensumdoc.pdf>
Fact Sheet on Resolution 1325 for Girls and Young Women:
http://www.peacebuild.ca/upload/fact_sheet.pdf

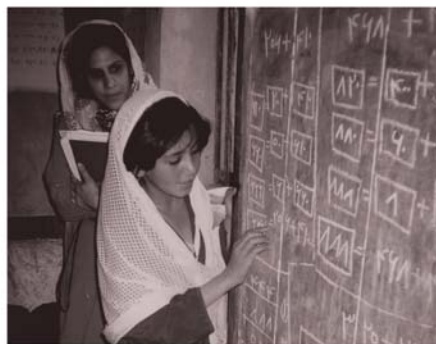
Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children
122 East 42nd Street, 12th Floor
New York, New York 10168
Tel: 212-551-3100 / Fax: 212-551-3180
www.womenscommission.org

"Don't Forget Us":
The Education and Gender-Based Violence Protection Needs
of Adolescent Girls from Darfur in Chad (2005)
http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/Td_ed.pdf
Youth Speak Out:
New Voices on the Protection and Participation of Young
People Affected by Armed Conflict (2005)
http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/cap_ysofinal_rev.pdf

GPWG
CPCC



Darfuri Refugee Girls in Chad carrying water
(c) Megan McKenna, Women's Commission
for Refugee Women and Children



Afghan girl in Pakistan writing on board
(c) Ramina Johal, Women's Commission
for Refugee Women and Children



Darfuri Refugee Girls in Chad carrying firewood
(c) Megan McKenna, Women's Commission
for Refugee Women and Children