



BRIEFING PAPER

Girl, disrupted

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Women and children make up 70% of the world's internally displaced population. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) highlights how the challenges young girls face around world increase when violence or conflict forces them to flee their homes. This briefing looks at the situations of displaced girls in five countries – Afghanistan, Central African Republic (CAR), Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Palestine – and explores some of the measures governments and aid workers have taken to help them.

Introduction

Violence, conflict, disasters and displacement have different impacts on men, women, girls and boys. Women and girls suffer higher rates of gender-based violence (GBV) at such times yet all too often the participation of women and girls in the humanitarian response and post conflict processes feature too low to contribute to a significant change. In societies

where women's role is more submissive or subservient, existing inequalities and vulnerabilities are often made worse.

These trends have led the UN to pass resolutions that aim to improve gender equality by better protecting women and girls, and broadening their participation in processes that affect their lives.

What is GBV?

GBV is an umbrella term for any harmful act perpetrated against a person's will based on socially ascribed gender differences between men and women of all ages.

Such acts violate a number of universal human rights protected by international instruments and conventions. Many but not all forms of GBV are also illegal and constitute criminal acts under national law and policies.

Girls, referred to here as women under the age of 18, become easy targets for smugglers, armed groups and even members

of their own family in times of conflict, violence and disaster. During displacement, they are prone to abuse and violence from within their own communities. Such acts take place in a chaotic environment characterised by a lack of shelter, privacy and child protection mechanisms, the sudden disruption of social fabric and severely depleted resources.

Young girls can also fall victim to harmful traditional practices, and are often given secondary consideration after their male siblings. Many are not empowered to say “no” and are unable to defend themselves. They become ever more vulnerable, with one violation likely to trigger others, and with each one any hope of regaining their childhood recedes.

National authorities and the humanitarian and development sectors have a role to play in mitigating the disruption and trauma that girls suffer during displacement. This means intervening at the onset of humanitarian crises to protect their human rights and working to advance social, political and economic equality in the longer term. Recent studies have shown that gender equality, particularly in education and employment, contributes to economic growth.

This paper focuses on the disruption of childhood and education, early and forced marriage, and female-headed households. It explores some of the projects that the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), its partners and national NGOs have set up, and which have succeeded in responding to girls’ protection needs. These stories highlight the amazing resilience capacities of displaced girls who have been supported and helped to bounce back, to restore their stolen childhood again and to be better equipped for the future.

A disrupted childhood

Sexual violence and harmful traditional practices such as early and forced marriage often increase during a humanitarian crisis. In CAR for example, where 20 per cent of the country’s population is internally displaced, 68 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18.

Displacement tends to deplete families’ resources, exposing internally displaced girls to a greater risk of early marriage. Some parents sell their under-age daughters into marriage in order to clear their debts. When a girl becomes pregnant, her future changes drastically and seldom for the better. Her schooling comes to an end, her job prospects evaporate and she becomes more vulnerable and less self-reliant. Her health is also put at significant risk. Around 70,000 adolescent girls die each year worldwide from complications during pregnancy.

The legal age for marriage in Afghanistan is 18 for boys and 16 for girls, but the law is not strictly enforced and under-age pregnancies are relatively common. According to the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and NGOs such as Medica Mondiale, 57 per cent of Afghan girls are forced to marry before the age of 18.

Naghma’s story: Kabul, Afghanistan

In the Charahi Qambar displacement camp in Kabul, Taj Mohammad had to borrow money after fleeing from Helmand province with his family. When he was unable to pay the loan back, a council of elders, or *jirga*, agreed that he should give his six-year old



daughter Naghma up for marriage to the 17-year-old son of his creditor. Naghma’s story was reported in the New York Times, prompting an anonymous donor to pay the debt and the marriage was cancelled. Sadly, however, this is far from always the case.

“The most effective tool in preventing these incidents and breaking the cycle of poverty is education.”

Ashiana, local NGO, Afghanistan

Parwana’s story: Tatar Khana, Afghanistan

Parwana is a ten-year-old internally displaced girl. She has six brothers and sisters and does not go to school. After she and her family fled the Taliban, her father became ill and had to stop work. He had little choice but to take out a bank loan to pay for his medical treatment, but he was unable to repay it and Parwana found herself engaged to a man 20 years her senior. Parwana’s mother approached NRC to seek support in providing protection and annulling the engagement. NRC could facilitate a *Jirga* and the marriage was postponed until the girl reaches the legal age. Her family receive food and non-food items to help them cope. Parwana continues to live with her parents and her childhood has been preserved.

Fatoumata’s story: CAR

Fatoumata does not know her real age, but believes she is between 17 and 19 years old. She is the mother of a four-year-old girl and a one-year-old boy. In December 2013, violent clashes between two armed groups, the Séléka and Anti-Balaka took place in her home region. Afraid the Anti-Balaka would attack the Muslim population, the family fled to Paoua where they had heard that other Muslims had taken refuge.



During their displacement, Fatoumata and her children were separated from her husband who later found refuge in Chad, leaving her to protect and care for their children alone.

Like many internally displaced people (IDPs) in CAR, Fatoumata sought refuge with a host, a woman called Aroda who took her and her children in. As the crisis in CAR continues, however, both Fatoumata’s and Aroda’s resources will wane – an example of the need for both displaced and host populations to be supported.

A disrupted education

The school dropout rate for displaced girls is frequently higher than for boys. When resources are scarce, they often stay at home to help their mothers and to save on transport costs and school fees. Often confined in overcrowded spaces, without privacy and with only limited freedom of movement, girls become more prone to abuse, harassment and enslavement. As such, they are prevented from fulfilling their potential.

In CAR, for example, the literacy rate for women aged 15 to 24 is 59.1 per cent, compared with 72.3 per cent for men of the same age group. This helps to perpetuate women’s poverty and exclusion, and undermines the economic and social progress of many developing countries in the long term.

CAR’s current crisis has had a devastating effect on schooling for both girls and boys. In Bossangoa region, education

has ground to a halt almost completely, and in the country as a whole more than 70 per cent of potential pupils - at least 450,000 children - are currently out of school.

In Colombia, ten per cent of the population has been forced to flee conflict and violence at some point in their lives. Thirty-three per cent of IDPs are aged between ten and 24, and around 1.1 million children and young people have been unable to return to school following their displacement. Girls in particular are struggling. According to a study in Valle del Cauca department, the majority of displaced women spent only half as much time in education as their counterparts in the general population.

Conflict often leaves facilities destroyed or unsafe. In Gaza, 18 schools and kindergartens were destroyed and more than 250 damaged during Operation Cast Lead led by the Israeli army in 2009. At the peak of the offensive almost 51,000 people, including around 28,500 children, sought refuge in 44 schools run by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Trauma can also be a significant barrier to education. Parents in Gaza said that conflict and displacement had left many children unmotivated and unable to concentrate at school. A 2011 survey by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) found that 90 per cent of young women in Gaza were suffering from depression, anxiety or fear.

Education remains a high priority for many displaced people. In DRC, 1.5 million children have been displaced by one of Africa's longest conflicts. IDPs' needs are huge, but a survey conducted by NRC and Save the Children in North Kivu province found that 30 per cent of people receiving humanitarian assistance prioritised education over food.

Yustin's story: Colombia

Ten-year-old Yustin, her mother and her six siblings fled violence perpetrated criminal armed groups. During her displacement she witnessed a member of one group rape a friend. The experience traumatised Yustin to the extent that she stopped going to school for a year, for fear she would be attacked herself.

She returned earlier this year as the violence subsided. NRC helped to repair the infrastructure of her school, supplied materials and trained teachers in emergency response. It has provided a safe environment for displaced children such as Yustin, proving that education is possible even in a volatile context.

"My mother would like me to be policewoman, when I grow up...but I'd like to teach mathematics" *Yustin.*

Domina's story: DRC

Forced to flee an attack on her village in Masisi, North Kivu province, Domina's family could no longer afford to send her to school. When NRC set up an education programme for more than 7,000 children across 13 schools in

the area, Domina was given hope. Now back at school, she feels safer and is back to an almost normal little girl's life.

"If all children were educated, the war would stop. If people are educated they will learn why joining the militia is bad" *Domina*

Saeda's story: Gaza Strip

Saeda is a 14-year-old displaced girl living in Gaza City. During Operation Cast Lead, she witnessed a sniper kill her father as Israeli forces invaded her neighbourhood. Her concentration and performance at school subsequently dropped. When she first joined the al-Qattan Centre, a project that offers support for both parents and children in Gaza, she was introverted and reluctant to participate. Through constant psychosocial support, and by engaging in positive activities, Saeda is now more active and social, and her performance at school is improving.



Conclusion and recommendations to national authorities and international humanitarian organisations working in situations of armed conflict and disasters:

Targeted prevention and response programmes should be put in place to address displaced girls' specific needs from the onset of a humanitarian crisis, and a gender lens should be applied to their planning and preparation. Such an approach is key to mitigating their vulnerability, boosting their resilience and making progress towards gender equality. The following recommendations aim to better identify and respond to girls' needs during emergencies and where possible to prevent them arising in the first place.

Reliable and comprehensive data should be collected, disaggregated by sex and age, and covering IDPs both in camps and those living with host families and communities. This is essential in establishing a clear picture of boys' and girls' needs in terms of protection, education, shelter and basic and social services. Data on separated and unaccompanied children is needed to identify those most likely to suffer abuse and neglect.

National authorities and both national and international humanitarian organisations should be responsible for setting up protection monitoring systems for this vulnerable group. This should include coordination between protection monitors, schools, health services and psychosocial workers, and the establishment of referral mechanisms that respect confidentiality and target the specific issues girls face.

IDPs and their hosts should be consulted throughout, as they are better placed than anyone to identify their problems and potential solutions. Carrying out early participatory assessments that involve the active and direct participation of men, women, boys and girls have proved to be an excellent tool to guide prevention and response planning. The participation of women and girls should also be encouraged through their involvement in IDPs' committees and decision-making processes in all phases of the humanitarian response, from assessment through planning to implementation and monitoring.

Particularly when faced with sensitive cultural issues, those involved in the response should strengthen their involvement



and partnerships with civil society organisations and authorities, because they are likely to have the best knowledge of the local customs and norms and the potential protection issues arising from them. With such specifics in mind, awareness should be raised on gender issues and GBV by training national and international humanitarians, civil society organisations, local partners, IDPs' representatives, teachers, social workers, police and other law enforcement officials.

Displaced girls should have access to sexual and reproductive health care, and safe spaces where they can interact and have some privacy, as soon as possible after their displacement. The availability of female doctors, social workers and teachers, and easy access to services that are sensitive to GBV needs, are also important in encouraging girls to come forward and supporting their rehabilitation and reinsertion into their communities.

The provision of schooling within emergency programmes has proved to be a good protection tool, especially when children may face being forced to enrol in armed groups, coerced into prostitution or becoming victims of trafficking, forced marriage or other abuses. Schools should only be used as emergency shelters as a last resort in an effort to minimise disruption to education. In cases where using schools is unavoidable, alternatives should be found as quickly as possible.

In order to encourage girls to attend school, programmes should reflect their specific needs and address gender-based barriers to education. Working with community groups and village leaders to raise awareness of, and ensure commitment to boys' and girls' equal rights to education is essential to this end.

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Sources:

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UN Security Council resolutions on GBV and women's participation: no. 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000) recognises that war affects women differently, and reaffirms the need to increase their role in decision-making on conflict prevention and resolution. The council subsequently adopted six additional resolutions on women, peace and security: 1820 in 2008, 1888 and 1889 in 2009, 1960 in 2010, 2106 in 2013 and 2122 in 2013. Taken together, they represent a vital framework for improving the situation of women in conflict-affected countries. For more information, visit: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/guiding-documents#sthash.NXOHxFZN.dpuf>

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