

## EXPERT CONSENSUS DOCUMENT

# Statement and Action Agenda from the Girls in Emergencies Collaborative\*

The Girls in Emergencies Collaborative†

**KEY WORDS** adolescent girls, climate change, humanitarian disasters, emergencies, human rights

Many adolescent girls—the poorest girls in the poorest communities—already live in an “emergency.” Humanitarian crises only amplify the call on their coping and caring capacities, while exacerbating their vulnerabilities. The frequency and intensity of emergencies, including natural disasters, conflicts, and infectious disease outbreaks such as Ebola, appear to be growing.<sup>1</sup> These emergencies threaten entire communities and whole countries, often with global implications. Many become virtually permanent. Although news coverage is short-lived, the average length of displacement for refugees is almost 20 years.<sup>2,1</sup> For too many girls worldwide, an emergency begins as an “event” and transforms into a lifetime.

## WHY THIS MATTERS

The adolescent girl is already at a triple disadvantage pre-emergency: her age, her sex, and her economic status all put her at risk. Her thin (or absent) friendship network, fragile access to safe public space, and tenuous claim on schooling are further strained or erased by displacement. Girls are maltreated and exploited, even before childbearing age; puberty dramatically elevates their risk for sexual violence, pregnancy, and HIV infection. Many bear or inherit children while still children themselves. Social

norms travel with the girl, generating a paradox: Girls are controlled under the guise of protection while their rights are violated and their goodwill and capacities are drawn on to mitigate scarcities and family trauma.

In the severest moments of an emergency, adolescent girls function as a default safety net or virtual credit card. A girl’s assets—labor, time, integrity, and safety—can be deployed to underwrite the risks and to “smooth” others’ material needs. She is the last to access survival resources, but the first expected to provide; she actively seeks out food, fuel, and water for her family. She may be encouraged or driven by circumstances to trade sex for goods or money; she may be forced into child marriages or short-term sexual liaisons for which her family (and intermediaries) receives money. Her lack of education undermines her own ability to obtain accurate information, discern dangers, or define realistic choices. Without a place to meet other girls and develop her voice and agency, she may doubt her abilities or blame herself for her circumstances. Sexual access to girls, promoted or simply not prevented, is not only a human rights abuse but an injustice that extends her crisis, whether through life-crippling pregnancies or disease (HIV, other sexually transmitted infections, and now, Ebola).

All authors had a role in writing the manuscript. None of the authors have any conflicts of interest to disclose.

Address correspondence to H.G.A. ([holly.atkinson@mssm.edu](mailto:holly.atkinson@mssm.edu)).

Organizations that have signed on to the Girls in Emergencies Collaborative Statement and Action Agenda as of September 2015 include the International Rescue Committee; Mercy Corps; Human Rights Program, Arnold Institute of Global Health at Mount Sinai; Plan USA; the Population Council; and the Women’s Refugee Commission. This statement outlines a collective effort to confront the failure to address the needs of adolescent girls in emergencies who are displaced within and across borders around the world.

† Members of the GIE Collaborative Statement drafting group include Omar Robles, Women’s Refugee Commission; Judith Bruce, Population Council; Holly G. Atkinson, Human Rights Program, Arnold Institute for Global Health, Mount Sinai; Dale Buscher, Women’s Refugee Commission; Karen Scriven, Mercy Corps; Kristin Kim Bart and Shelby French, International Rescue Committee; and Judithe Registre and Audrey Anderson, Plan USA.

<sup>1</sup>Original statistic, ie, reference to 17-year average length of displacement, was first featured at the 30<sup>th</sup> Standing Committee Meeting of the Executive Committee of the UNHCR in New York City on June 10, 2004. See page 2: <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4a54bc00d.pdf>.

## WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE INTEND TO DO

The Girls in Emergencies (GIE) Collaborative—a group representing several major emergency response organizations—focuses on the adolescent girl because evidence reveals that she not only faces a multiplicity of risks during a crisis, but also because she remains invisible, unprotected, and unengaged, particularly in the crucial first 45 days of a crisis. Current practice lags behind field realities. To the extent that we identified “good practices,” these are small in scale and implemented too late.

We need on-the-ground engagement with girls and purposeful field-testing of strategies and tools. Despite a plethora of gender guidelines and litany of “duty bearers,” adolescent girls are left behind in emergencies, just as they have been left behind in conventional development. This must change.

Humanitarian protocols are siloed in content and marked in time—rigidly defined clusters responding during “phases of an emergency.” To support the humanitarian community and its collective effort to reach adolescent girls (ages 10–19), the GIE Collaborative has united around 3 urgent and doable actions:

1. **To identify and gather critical information about girls in the earliest days of an emergency when risks may be the highest.** We need to “see” girls—early and often. At registration, we have to provide girls the documentation they need to independently access services, such as identification cards. Although humanitarian actors may collect age- and sex-disaggregated data on displaced persons, this basic information often is not analyzed, not acted on, or insufficient. *The GIE Collaborative aims to develop, test, and deploy acute-phase rapid field enumeration tools that identify the least visible, “off-track” girls and connect them to survival resources, to other like-situated girls, and to tailored programs and mentorship support.*
2. **To develop specific and visible mechanisms that connect girls to basic human needs services and logistical support.** We will explore explicit girl-

branded mechanisms (eg, vouchers, color-coding) that link girls to resources and also build places (formal and informal) where we build their skills and assets. Because of the fluid, unpredictable nature of emergencies and intense siloing, basic infrastructures often are inconveniently timed and dangerously located. For example, decisions about the location of permanent water points, the timing of food distributions and the weight of prepackaged humanitarian kits are made with nominal consideration to young, female users. We need girls’ early input on service design and delivery in concert with the creation of girl-centered *safe places* and delivery platforms. *The GIE Collaborative will experiment with explicit ways to connect adolescent girls to the humanitarian resources that measurably benefit them, with an emphasis on priorities during different phases of an emergency (eg, day 1, days 2–14, days 15–45, days 46–180, and after day 180).*

3. **To engage girls in the relief and recovery process.** We recognize that meaningful engagement is a priority. Intentionally seeking girls’ input—their self-expressed needs and concerns—and then incorporating their voices into immediate service delivery and programming must become a foundational pillar for relief, recovery, and empowerment. In addition to seeking girls’ input, humanitarian operations should not sideline their capacities to safely participate in relief and recovery efforts. Options include participation in community health campaigns (eg, using bed nets and safe water), in social mobilization (eg, community mapping), and in the introduction and management of economic recovery assets (eg, solar lights, green energy sources, and thermal stoves). *The GIE Collaborative aims to identify creative and substantive ways that girls can appropriately and safely contribute to the response.*

We commit ourselves and call on the humanitarian community to go beyond the rhetoric—to move to earth with bold and measurable actions that protect, serve, and engage adolescent girls from the onset of an emergency.

---

## REFERENCES

1. Burkle FM, Martone G, Greenough PG. The changing face of humanitarian crises. *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 2014;20:25–42.
2. Milner J, Loescher G. Forced migration policy briefing 6: responding to protracted refugee situations—lessons from a decade of discussion. Oxford: University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Center; 2011.