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RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Adaptation in Crisis: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Adolescent Girls in Humanitarian Emergency Settings



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By: Population Council

Adolescent girls occupy central roles in families' coping and survival strategies in times of crisis. Despite and because of this, adolescent girls suffer disproportionate consequences of humanitarian crises and carry heavy burdens due to their unique needs and circumstances. Yet formal humanitarian protocols and emergency responses rarely include dedicated efforts geared toward adolescent girls, especially those who are harder to reach.

On [October 26, 2023](#), the Population Council's [GIRL Center](#) convened a group of practitioners, researchers, and supporters to hear from researchers and practitioners working on the ground to reach displaced adolescent girls. Panelists shared perspectives on critical knowledge, skills, and support adolescent girls living in humanitarian emergencies need to claim their rights and persevere in such high-stress settings.

Some of the key insights and recommendations included:

- **Adolescent girls in humanitarian settings need safe spaces to interact with peers that share similar experiences and to learn skills for future livelihoods.**
- **Providing access to accurate information on SRHR for adolescent girls and their community gatekeepers has received positive responses.**

- **Door-to-door recruitment for adolescent girl participants, led by local community workers, has been most effective.**
- **Evidence from a multisectoral intervention indicates that conditional cash transfers can help address early marriage and childbearing and also encourage school enrollment.**
- **Adolescent girls in refugee camps face multiple levels of isolation and lack mobility.**
- **Investing in access to and quality girls' education, as well as supporting girls' transition into higher levels education or economic opportunities are important.**

Judith Bruce, Senior Associate and Policy Analyst at the Population Council, opened the panel discussion, reflecting on the [Girls in Emergencies Collaborative](#) convened by the Population Council and a coalition of leading humanitarian organizations eight years ago, which committed to supporting adolescent girls in humanitarian crises. Since then, the world has seen intensified and accelerated humanitarian crises due to conflict, climate, and disease.

Bruce set the scene for the day's discussions, noting that the poorest girls in the poorest communities are already living in and managing complex environments. When humanitarian emergencies create sudden acute change, they can result in displacement, scarcities, and stress. Adolescent girls are often crucial social and health shock-absorbers during emergencies, but crises tend to reverse progressive trends and increase risks placed on these girls, especially sexual violence. Evidence-based responses can help address these challenges, particularly through early action.

A panel of experts shared their experiences and evidence from working in three distinct contexts: Syrians living in refugee camps in South Beirut, Lebanon; Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh; and drought-affected pastoralist communities in Wajir, Kenya.

Fatima Khaddour, Lebanon Head of Programs, [Basmeh & Zeitooneh for Relief and Development](#) (B&Z) described the environment for Syrian adolescent girls living in refugee camps in Lebanon. She noted their need for a safe space to interact with peers with similar experiences, and to learn skills for future livelihoods. B&Z's provision of quality, accurate information – particularly on sexual and reproductive health and rights – for adolescent girls as well as gate keepers in their communities (mothers, mothers-in-law, and husbands) received notable positive responses from participants. Further investment in training community mentors as well as community pharmacists and health workers to better service emergency contexts would be an important priority.

Rima Mourtada, Epidemiologist and Independent Consultant, further shared evidence and lessons learned from the [evaluation of the B&Z program in Lebanon](#). The evaluation proved that door to door recruitment to reach invisible and underserved girls was key, and that recruitment of participants by local community workers was effective. She added that recruitments in emergency contexts should anticipate high drop-out rates given the unique local environments and factors. She also echoed the importance of investing in connecting women to SRHR services.

[Beth Kangwana](#), Executive Director of Population Council Kenya, shared [key findings](#) from evaluating the multisectoral [AGI-K program](#) for young adolescent girls in Wajir, Kenya – a pastoralist,

nomadic and largely Somali ethnic community that is chronically affected by droughts. The program showed the effectiveness of taking a multisectoral approach for the girls, their households, and their communities. Evidence showed that girls that were out of school that received any form of conditional cash transfer were two-thirds less likely to be married, two-thirds less likely to have had a first child, and five times more likely to be enrolled in school four years after the program ended. For future scaling up of similar programs, she noted that ensuring quality of education, supporting girls in their transition to secondary and higher education, as well as ensuring education can be best utilized for improved economic opportunities.

Sajeda Amin, Senior Associate of Population Council shared insights from the [Council's research](#) on the Rohingya refugee community in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, on how best to reach serve adolescent girls in humanitarian settings. Her studies of the Rohingya population pointed to multiple layers of isolation for adolescent girls, within the refugee camps as well as their sub-structures, which then have implications to access and provision of various resources. There were also significant restrictions on girls' mobility largely due to concerns for their safety, given risks of sexual abuse and exploitation. As such, the study leveraged an established early childhood education program, working with adolescent parents of children to provide livelihoods skills training. She highlighted the imperative to provide access to work and education, which are critical gaps for girls in humanitarian settings.

Speakers reflected on several ongoing humanitarian crises around the world and their impact on adolescent girls. They shared challenges of crafting evidence-based programs, but also opportunities to scale and invest in effective programs to lay the foundations of improved physical and community security, social participation, reproductive health, choice in marriage and childbearing, psychological well-being, and livelihoods engagement in dynamic and often regressive humanitarian settings.