Violence is part of the lives of many adolescent girls around the world, much of which is perpetrated by partners, family members and communities. However, programmes in fragile settings fail to specifically address the violence that adolescent girls’ experience, including female genital mutilation (FGM) and child, early and forced marriage (CEFM).

Some four of every 10 women experience physical violence before the age of 16. It is estimated that 150 million girls under the age of 18 have experienced rape or other forms of sexual violence. According to Girls Count, violence is part of the lives of many adolescent girls around the world, much of which is perpetrated by partners or family members.

Adolescent girls are at a critical place in their life where they can realise their potential, build assets, and transition into a safe, healthy and productive adulthood. However, this is also the age where girls drop out of school, become pregnant or are forced into marriage.

During and after conflicts and natural disasters, women and girls are more threatened by violence than ever. Destruction, flight and upheaval grind down the protection women and girls have in times of stability, and violence against women and girls escalates.

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) increases in conflict, disaster and emergency situations. Household economic pressures and families’ fears of sexual abuse or harassment towards unmarried girls escalate and often contribute to girls being married at a younger age.

Female genital mutilation (FGM), although not a direct result of humanitarian emergencies, will move with the displaced communities in which it is traditionally practiced. Communities who do not practice FGM often feel pressure when being hosted by communities that traditionally practice FGM, and begin this practice to prevent girls from being ostracised. This practice might also increase as a pre-requisite of early and forced marriage.

Despite these high rates of violence experienced by girls, programming for girls often focuses simply on increasing access to education, health, justice and economic assets. While each of these interventions does reduce their vulnerability, only an explicit focus on preventing and responding to violence against women and girls (VAWG) can begin to address the social norms perpetuating violence. Furthermore, both FGM and CEFM tend to be considered a secondary concern in VAWG programming during emergency settings, where protection networks and structures are broken down and VAWG escalates.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is recognised globally as a leader in preventing and responding to violence against women and girls (VAWG) in conflict and other emergencies. The IRC’s work with adolescent girls envisions a world where girls can build healthy and productive lives, emerge as leaders and participants within their communities, and be protected from violence, sexual abuse and exploitation.

Multi-sectoral, girl-specific and age-appropriate services in humanitarian settings are crucial to protect girls from violence, and to empower them as independent, healthy and productive citizens – respected and valued by their families and communities.
IRC’s Integrated Response

To address child, early and forced marriage and harmful social norms such as female genital mutilation, the IRC delivers integrated programmes with girls across 16 countries including Haiti, Kenya, South Sudan and Thailand – while also investing heavily in related research. Our innovative programmes focus on increasing opportunities for girls, on providing services and support to those who have experienced violence, including female genital mutilation (FGM) and child, early and forced marriage (CEFM).

Our work recognises that girls can be part of larger change in their own communities, if greater investments are made. Working “with the girls” instead of “on behalf of girls”, IRC’s programmes are driven and led by girls in a way that is owned and empowers them long into the future. Equally, IRC considers assessing and addressing social norms among communities that perpetuate CEFM and FGM very important, including working with men and boys.

Promising interventions to protect and empower adolescent girls

The IRC’s research suggests the following programme models are effective in supporting girls in fragile settings:

SAFE SPACE PROGRAMMING & LIFE SKILLS

‘Safe Spaces’ are essential in humanitarian settings. IRC’s research and 25 years of experience with adult women and found that friendship networks of girls were less developed than boys and that social isolation was strongly correlated with the experience of forced sex. In these safe spaces and in other programming, IRC believes building girls’ assets including life skills are critical for girls’ protection and development, particularly in crisis or conflict affected contexts. The IRC works to build girls’ human, social and financial assets through life skills training and discussions (“non-cognitive” skills) such as self-esteem and goal setting through all its girl-focused protection, education and livelihoods interventions.

Girl Empower

Our ‘Girl Empower’ programmes in Ethiopia and Liberia create a safe space for girls and includes life skills training and asset building in humanitarian settings. Within the Girl Empower Life Skills Curriculum, one of the modules focuses on My Safety/My Well-Being and includes FGM and CEFM as harmful practices affecting girls.

Creating Opportunities through Mentoring, Parental Involvement and Safe Spaces in Pakistan, Ethiopia and the DRC (COMPASS)

With the support of the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) IRC is developing a three year programme which will, like Girl Empower, create safe spaces for girls and implement a locally tailored life skills/asset building curriculum for both girls and their caregivers; build the capacity of local service providers (especially health services and care management) to respond to violence against adolescent girls, and engage the wider community in this effort. The programme will be implemented in refugee camps in Ethiopia, and with displaced communities in both DRC and Pakistan. This project also includes a robust research agenda to identify effective and supportive responses for adolescent girls in humanitarian contexts where they are largely invisible and under-served. IRC is committed to sharing the learning from this programme among the humanitarian community.

Healing Classrooms

In emergency and post-conflict settings, the IRC increases girls’ access to education both through direct provision of education and through strengthening the education system as a whole, combining a focus on learning outcomes with girls’ protection and psychological and social well-being.

Vision not Victim

The IRC has worked with groups of girls in the DRC to come together, explore their possibilities and cultivate essential skills through creative activities and discussions. With the help of mentors, each girl created a vision for herself and a strategic plan for achieving her ambitions. She then designed and directed a photo shoot, posing as her future self, having achieved her goal.

We later shared the photographs with members of the local community, sparking discussions about how parents and leaders can support the realisation of these visions, and inspiring many other girls to reconsider their own potential.

FOCUS ON ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Girls Empowered through Microfranchise in Kenya

With support from the Nike Foundation, the IRC has been working on economic empowerment and job creation for girls in the slums of Nairobi. We aim to create economic opportunities for adolescent girls at risk of early marriage and other negative coping strategies and have helped over 2,000 girls launch independent and sustainable businesses. One of the participants, Juliet Nerea, said: “There are lots of girls just hanging around because they have nothing to do. They are being used, they get early pregnancies. I now have courage to face the world. I can talk to young girls, I can encourage them, I can teach them the skill I have now. You know my world has changed, it has really changed a lot.”

Rosine, age 13, participated in IRC’s Vision not Victim Project. She wants to become a surgeon.

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IRC’s recommendations for the Girl Summit

The IRC celebrates the UK government’s commitment to tackle FGM and CEFM within the broader VAWG pandemic. To seize the international commitment to end these harmful practices led by the UK through the Girl Summit; the IRC has the following recommendations for governments, UN agencies, international NGOs and civil society organisations:

1. Recognise and tackle CEFM and FGM as part of gender inequality and the full spectrum of violence girls and young women are exposed to. Traditional harmful practices speak to discriminatory social norms that directly affect women and girls in their families and communities. Legislation, policy and programmes to tackle CEFM and FGM should tackle these root causes.

2. Interventions to tackle FGM and CEFM should be driven by girls and adopt an empowering approach. Investing in girls is critical to support them in fulfilling the vital social, economic and political roles they play in their communities. In contexts affected by conflict, crisis and extreme poverty, such investment will help reduce their exposure to violence and exploitation, and will build critical experience and skills that will empower them to become valued in their communities.

3. Girls in humanitarian and fragile settings should benefit from policy, funding and programming to tackle CEFM and FGM and other forms of VAWG. Supporting girl’s protection and empowerment in humanitarian settings is crucial. Programmes aimed at increasing girls’ access to education and training, and to preventing and tackling harmful practices in fragile settings must be included in ongoing processes focused on VAWG in emergencies. These processes include the UK-US led Call to Action to prioritise women and girls in emergencies; as well as highlighted in platforms like the Girl Summit and efforts to position these issues in the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

For more information please contact Diana Trimiño Diana.Trimino@rescue-uk.org

Jeanine, 16, wants to become Minister for Human Rights.

Yvette, 13, wants to become a photographer.