

What do you want to do when you grow up?
While this is a question many of us are asked often as we grow up, in many parts of the world girls reach adulthood without ever being asked about their dreams and ambitions.

Changing the social norms that perpetuate gender inequality holds enormous potential for positive change at the individual, household, community and country levels.



Jeanine, 16, wants to become Minister for Human Rights. Photo: Meredith Hutchison

Girls all over the world are held back from reaching their potential because they live in societies where they are considered second-class citizens compared to boys.

Unequal power relationships define girls' experiences at the individual, household, community and country levels. Girls do not get to make their own life decisions and are more likely to be responsible for cooking, cleaning and looking after siblings or elderly relatives. They are also less able to make friends or meet people outside the household and have less access to education, training and work. Societies' roles and expectations of girls - "social norms" - also often define girls' vulnerability to physical, sexual and emotional abuse and exploitation.

Adolescent girls are at a critical place in their life where they can build assets such as supportive networks, life and livelihood skills, and transition into a safe, healthy and productive adulthood. Instead, this is often the age where girls drop out of school, become pregnant or are forced into marriage.

During conflicts and other emergencies, girls are more vulnerable than ever, including to an increase in these harmful practices. They have even less access to opportunities and are more likely to face exploitation and abuse from their families, host communities and people in positions of power.

Changes to social norms that perpetuate unequal opportunities and harmful practices require a deliberate and long-term effort. This is why investing in girls is critical to support them in fulfilling the vital social, economic and political roles they can play in their communities. In fragile contexts, 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 members of their communities, successful employees, business women and citizens.

Multi-sectoral, girl-specific and age-appropriate services in humanitarian and post-conflict settings are crucial to empower

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.

girls as independent, healthy and productive individuals - respected and valued by their families and communities, as well as to protect them from violence and exploitation.



IRC's Integrated Response

To address the root causes that restrict girls' opportunities and to prevent violence, the IRC delivers integrated programmes with girls across 16 countries including Haiti, Kenya, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Thailand – while also investing heavily in girl-specific research. Our innovative programmes focus on increasing opportunities for girls, and on providing services and support to those who have experienced violence. This comprehensive approach supports the pursuit of IRC's broader vision: a world where women and girls live free from violence as valued and respected members of their community.

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.

Promising interventions to protect and empower adolescent girls

IRC's research suggests the following programme models are effective in empowering 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 girls 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 and livelihoods 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.

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 implementing 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 case management) to respond to violence against adolescent girls, and engage the wider community in this effort. The programme is 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.

For example, with support from the Canadian government, the IRC is extending education through a healing classrooms approach to 25,000 children in remote and insecure areas of Afghanistan reaching 53% girls compared with a 36% national average female attendance rate.



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

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, spurring 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 supported economic empowerment and job creation with 2,400 girls in the slums of Nairobi. Through this programme, the girls launched independent and sustainable businesses, which increased their income and allowed many to continue in education. 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.”



IRC's recommendations for the European Union

As a major humanitarian and development donor, the EU has a unique role to play in promoting and protecting girl's rights and in ensuring girls are fully empowered and able to contribute to their communities as drivers of change.

To this aim, the EU should:

1. Acknowledge the unique challenges and risks faced by girls in fragile settings and tailor programs to these specific needs. This requires multidisciplinary programs ensuring safe spaces, age appropriate services and life-skills opportunities for adolescent girls. Girls should be consulted and prioritised in all relevant legislation, policy, funding mechanisms and programmes by both humanitarian and development actors;
2. Make sure commitments made in the *2010-2015 EU Plan of Action on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development* are implemented through actionable investment choices. In particular, priority should be given to programmes strengthening girls education and economic empowerment, as they are deterrents to the many of the specific problems faced by adolescent girls. Programmes should address challenges such as girl-specific barriers to education and participation in the labour force, access to savings and credit, access to market-relevant skills training, inheritance and ownership rights;
3. Strengthen its support to partner countries in combating gender-based violence in all its manifestations, as well as discrimination against girls. Interventions to tackle harmful practices affecting girls should be driven by girls and adopt an empowering approach;
4. Include girl-specific needs in humanitarian and fragile settings within ongoing policy, funding and programming processes to tackle GBV in emergencies. The EU can play a proactive role in including girl-specific commitments and programmes within processes such as the Call to Action to protect women and girls in emergencies and the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

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