



Resettling Adolescent Girls in the United States: Program and Policy Considerations

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Adolescent Girls Displaced by Conflict and Disaster

Violence is part of the lives of many adolescent girls around the world, largely due to deeply entrenched social norms that perpetuate gender inequality. When conflict and disaster strike, a girls' risk of exploitation and abuse only increases, and does so at significantly higher rates than adolescent boys. Moreover, the frequency and intensity of humanitarian disasters is growing and threatens entire communities and whole countries. Global displacement is currently at its highest point since World War II. Many crises are, in fact, becoming virtually permanent as the average length of displacement is now nearly 20 years.

As a result, for too many girls worldwide, an emergency starts as a single “event” and transforms into decades of protracted displacement, affecting their education, health, safety, livelihoods, and futures. Girls' thin or absent friendship network, fragile access to safe public spaces, and tenuous claim on schooling are further strained by displacement, making them one of the most marginalized populations within an already vulnerable group of refugees and internally displaced people. For many girls, resettlement in the U.S. offers an opportunity to rebuild and regain their lives through creating social networks, accessing safe spaces, and pursuing their educational goals. While these opportunities are inherently present through resettlement, supportive programs are needed to help adolescent girls take advantage of these opportunities while overcoming the many barriers they faced during conflict, displacement, and flight.



Photo by J. Wawrzniak

For example:

- Worldwide, up to 50% of sexual assaults are committed against girls under 16 and an estimated 150 million girls under the age of 18 have experienced some form of sexual violence. For girls under 15 at the time of sexual initiation, up to 45% report that their first sexual experience was forced.¹
- Girls are 2.5 times more likely to drop out of school than boys during humanitarian emergencies. In 2015, alone, 39 million girls had their education disrupted by emergencies, leaving them particularly

¹ UN Women, The Facts: Violence Against Women and the Millennium Development Goals, 2010, http://www.endvawnow.org/uploads/browser/files/EVAW_FactSheet_KM_2010EN.pdf.

vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and abuse.²

- Nine of the top ten countries with the highest rates of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) are considered fragile states.³ During conflict, disaster, and emergency situations, CEFM increases as household economic pressures and families' fears of sexual abuse or harassment towards unmarried girls escalates. In Syrian refugee communities in Jordan, for example, rates of registered child marriages almost tripled between 2011 and 2014, from 12% to just under 32%.⁴
- Female genital mutilation (FGM), although not a direct result of humanitarian emergencies, will move or increase with the displaced communities in which it is traditionally practiced. This practice might also increase as a pre-requisite of early and forced marriage.

In spite of the challenges they face, adolescent girls are at a critical juncture in their lives when they can realize their potential, build assets, and transition into a safe, healthy, and productive adulthood. Cross-cutting, girl-specific, and age-appropriate services tailored to meet their needs as girls and as refugees in the U.S. are essential to protect them from violence and empower them to be respected and valued members of their families, their schools, and their communities.

IRC's U.S. Programs

Each year, tens of thousands of refugees fleeing violence and persecution resettle in the United States. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) helps resettled refugees to survive, recover and regain control of their lives, and works to ensure they are safe, healthy, educated, economically well and empowered in their new communities.

The IRC resettles over 14,000 refugees in the U.S. each year and helps over 35,000 refugees and immigrants through an array of strengths-based programs that build skills, knowledge, and confidence to help newcomers become contributing members to their new communities. Nearly half of the refugees IRC resettles are women and girls, many of whom come from countries with a high prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV), including domestic violence and sexual assault (DV/SA). Young people comprise a significant proportion of the IRC caseload and have particular vulnerabilities during their resettlement and integration journeys.



Photo by J. Wawrzniak

Over the past two years (2014-2016), the IRC has resettled refugees from 50 countries, including over 5,000 girls under the age of 18, nearly 35% of whom were aged 11 through 17. The top five countries of origin for resettled refugee girls included Afghanistan, Burma, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Somalia. Prevalence studies indicate that 98% of Somali women and girls and 8% of Iraqi women and girls have undergone FGM.⁵ Additionally, the rates of girls being married before the age of 18 are 45% in Somalia, 37% in DRC, 33% in Afghanistan, and 24% in Iraq.⁶

While resettlement is often seen as offering the greatest hope and safety for many refugee girls, life after resettlement includes significant stressors. Adolescent girls have to navigate the complex and, at times,

² UNICEF, Education Cannot Wait: A Fund for Education in Emergencies, 2016, http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UnicefEducationCannotWaitBriefing_2016_s.pdf.

³ Council on Foreign Relations, Fragile States, Fragile Lives: Child Marriage Amid Disaster and Conflict, 2014, <http://www.cfr.org/global/fragile-states-fragile-lives/p33093>.

⁴ UNICEF, A Study on Early Marriage in Jordan, 2014, [http://www.unicef.org/mena/UNICEFJordan_EarlyMarriageStudy2014\(1\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/mena/UNICEFJordan_EarlyMarriageStudy2014(1).pdf).

⁵ UNICEF, Female genital mutilation/cutting, 2013.

⁶ UNICEF, State of the world's children data, 2013.

conflicting expectations of their families and their new communities. For instance, many girls are expected to help with household needs such as childcare, housework or income-generating work; however, they must also adhere to laws and customs here in the U.S. that mandate school attendance and put great emphasis on the differing roles and responsibilities between adults and children. Additionally, refugee youth tend to acquire language skills faster than their parents, which can create identity confusion and friction between the generations.⁷ Many refugee girls act as liaisons between family members and the community while learning English, going to school, and adjusting to their new surroundings. These post-resettlement stressors often compound the significant trauma-related stressors that exist for many child and adolescent refugees due to their experiences pre-resettlement.⁸ Despite these barriers, girls who are offered resettlement often thrive, gaining education, employment, and successful integration.

Across its U.S. Programs network, the IRC offers a variety of specialized services to help children and youth adjust to life in the U.S. and to build a bright future. Program offerings include after-school enrichment programs, academic coaching and mentoring, computer literacy courses, vocational and language training, college and career readiness sessions, and modules on leadership, civic awareness and life skills.

Some example of program offerings focused specifically on adolescent girls include:

1. **School-based adolescent peer support groups** – Across multiple sites, school-based support groups provide girl-only safe spaces that help refugee girls better adjust to their new lives in the U.S., including improving coping skills, learning about reproductive health information, and receiving support in adjusting to school systems in the U.S. These groups are a pillar in IRC’s youth services as they give adolescent girls the opportunity to create connections with other girls their age, normalizing their experiences as adolescents and as refugees, while building and enhancing key skills and foundational knowledge that help them thrive in their new environments.
2. **International Day of the Girl celebrations and events** – Many offices across the IRC’s U.S. network of 26 resettlement sites participate, organize, and/or support celebrations and events locally for the International Day of the Girl, celebrated annually on October 11. These events range from informational open houses to planned picnic celebrations with activities geared towards girls and their families.
3. **New Roots Youth Food Justice programs** – In the New Roots Intergenerational Food Justice Internship, program staff partner high school refugee girls with refugee community elders through activities such as gardening in the IRC New Roots community garden, cooking fresh meals at their high school, and maintaining a school garden.

“Women do all of the work around the world – have jobs, take care of kids, and tend farms. But people think women aren’t strong. We are and we need to be respected.”

- Female Youth Food Justice Participant, Age 14

In addition to current adolescent-girl specific programming outlined above, the IRC is currently exploring options for integrating new programmatic elements for girls into existing youth programming. For example, IRC’s New York office operates a flagship enrichment program, the Refugee Youth Summer Academy, which helps refugee youth prepare both academically and socially for entry into the New York City public school system. Since its inception in 1999, the Academy has supported more than 1,000 children from 30 countries through a six-week curriculum that includes English, math, and social studies, as well as dance and storytelling. This program, which now serves as a model for other IRC offices, is well-suited to deliver additional services and programming specifically tailored to addressing adolescent girls’ needs during and after resettlement, including IRC’s innovative Vision Not Victim visioning and life skills curriculum.⁹

⁷ Zhou, M., Straddling different worlds: The acculturation of Vietnamese refugee children, 2001. In R. G. Rumbaut & A. Portes (Eds.), *Ethnicities: Children of immigrants in America* (pp. 187-227). Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁸ Lustig, S. et al., Review of child and adolescent refugee mental health. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 43(1), 24-36, 2004, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1097/00004583-200401000-00012>.

⁹ For more information on Vision, Not Victim please see: <http://qbvresponders.org/vision-victim/>.

Recommendations

Understanding that adolescent girls who are resettled to the U.S. face unique barriers to integration is just the first step to ensuring that they are able to not only survive, but thrive in their new home. Additionally, resettlement agencies, donors, and policymakers must also:

1. **Invest in programming that is tailored to meet adolescent girls' specific needs through a holistic and cross-cutting approach.** This requires specific attention to be paid to providing girl-only safe spaces, psychosocial counseling, educational support and tutoring, life skills, age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health education and services, mentorship opportunities, and livelihoods programming that addresses girl-specific barriers to participation in the workforce.
2. **Recognize and tackle CEFM, FGM, and other forms of GBV as critical barriers to gender equality for adolescent girls resettled to the U.S.** These harmful traditional practices speak to discriminatory social norms that directly affect women and girls. Programming and policy must address the root causes of these practices and their manifestations in the resettlement context in order to help girls navigate a safe and healthy transition to their new lives in the U.S. This can be accomplished through early screening, outreach to medical and other youth providers, and community education.
3. **Facilitate the creation of girl-only advisory boards to guide decision-making on adolescent girl programming among refugee service providers.** The best method for ensuring adolescent girls benefit from targeted programming is to directly engage them in deciding upon activities as well as planning and implementing desired programming. Not only will this make for more suitable activities for girls participating in programs, but it will also build leadership development and peer advocacy skills for advisory board members.
4. **Mobilize parents, caregivers, and community leaders to support their daughters and advocate for social norms change.** In order to best support adolescent girls in their resettlement journey, it is critical that a strong advocacy and community and parent engagement component is incorporated into programming. Advocacy can help identify and support community-based solutions for addressing GBV and gender inequality; facilitate cohesion between girls, their families, and their resettled community; and ensure parents' and caregivers' concerns about the safety of their daughters are addressed—leading to increased attendance and improved outcomes for girls participating in programs.
5. **Collaborate with state and local advocacy organizations to address any policy barriers to girls' participation in programs.** In some states and local jurisdictions, restrictions on girls' access to confidential health services, school-based sexual health education, and legal protections against CEFM, FGM, child abuse, DV/SA, and honor killings may inhibit girls from participating in organized activities and programs. For example, without comprehensive sexuality education and access to contraception, adolescent girls face the threat of unintended pregnancy, which may prevent them from continuing their education and expose them to familial violence which then goes unreported. Working in partnership with girls, their families and communities, resettlement agencies, refugee service providers, immigration advocacy groups, and state and local authorities—including schools and healthcare providers—may help in addressing policy and programmatic restrictions that impact girls' health, education, and legal rights.

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