

We must empower and support girls in crisis

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Young women in Benue state, Nigeria. Adolescent girls are uniquely vulnerable in conflict situations and crises. Photo by: [Kristian Buus / Stars Foundation](#) / CC BY-NC-ND

For many young people today, life is not easy. A happy upbringing — with opportunities to learn, play and feel safe — is still a distant prospect. Burdened with adult roles and deprived of their basic rights, adolescents are regularly exposed to labor exploitation, trafficking, social isolation associated with early marriage, mortality or morbidity as a result of early pregnancy and childbirth-related complications, violence and sexual abuse.

Being an adolescent girl in times of war or conflict means even higher risks than adolescent boys. From the northeast corner of Nigeria to the war-torn towns of Syria and Iraq as well as Afghanistan or Central Africa, adolescent girls are uniquely vulnerable in conflict situations and crises. Moreover, there are still many “forgotten emergencies” worldwide, crisis situations to which no one pays attention.

Girls who live in or are fleeing conflict zones, or those who have been displaced as a result of climate change, natural disasters or conflict, face profound and devastating consequences. Research has shown, for example, that when conflicts or crises displace adolescent girls from their homes and schools, their education is disrupted, exposing them to an increased risk of exploitation and making them even more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, forced early marriage and early pregnancy.

Especially damaging to girls during this critical stage of development, these consequences have wider impact. They can pose a serious threat to peace and impede efforts to achieve sustainable development. When girls are married off early, they often drop out of school. When they drop out of school, they are usually unable to acquire the professional and personal skills that lead to the type of employment that can yield a steady income and enable them to provide for their families. The negative consequences snowball, hampering efforts to create a safer and more equitable world.

Several international standards have been established to ensure the protection of women and girls from violence

and discrimination, and to empower them to lead their communities toward a more peaceful, prosperous and equitable future. However, while they are a worthy starting point, none of these standards really focuses on the particular demographic of girls in crisis settings. We are all aware that this is a glaring omission in today's world, where girls are increasingly targets of violence and exploitation.

Over the years, I have had many conversations with young girls and women worldwide. I also have adolescent children of my own, so I am quite sensitive to the many challenges young people face today. That is why I want to be actively engaged in efforts to bring together leading voices in development, policy and the media to discuss how we can collaborate to meet the needs of girls in conflict.

In advance of International Women's Day, I had the pleasure of participating in an event in Washington that brought together the best and brightest minds, including girls, to help tackle some of the greatest challenges facing girls in crisis settings. Under the leadership of the [International Center for Research on Women](#), several organizations reflected on a more systematic and scientific approach to the issue. We worked to develop real solutions that practitioners, aid workers, governments and NGOs can use to prevent adolescent girls from falling through the cracks. We helped develop a pathway forward, so that girls living in conflict situations or in refugee camps and girls who migrate as a result of climate change into unstable regions may have access to the resources that can meet their unique needs.

"Girls are their own best advocates, and we must listen to them carefully. They often show dignity and remain hopeful of a better future in which they can flourish."

— Her Majesty Queen Mathilde of the Belgians

It is my hope that, as a result of this work, the world will begin to acknowledge that while girls are specifically vulnerable in crises, they are not mere victims. During my many official visits, I have learned that girls can be empowered to resist, to fight back without responding with violence and to help heal communities for years to come. Girls are their own best advocates, and we must listen to them carefully. They often show dignity and remain hopeful of a better future in which they can flourish.

Adolescent girls have the power to be significant agents of positive change in their communities, in the midst of conflict and crises as well as in times of peace. They deserve to be taken seriously, especially in matters that concern them directly. As for us adults, we must give them all the support we can.

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