

In double jeopardy: adolescent girls and disasters

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'Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls' is an annual report published by Plan, which assesses the current state of the world's girls. While women and children are recognised in policy and planning, girls' needs and rights are often ignored. The reports provide evidence, including the voices of girls themselves, as to why they need to be treated differently from boys and adult women. They also use information from primary research, in particular a small study set up in 2006 following 142 girls from nine countries. Past reports have covered education, conflict, economic empowerment, cities and technology, and how boys and young men can support gender equality. Plan is an international development agency and has been working with children and their communities in 50 countries worldwide for over 75 years. The 2013 State of the World's Girls report focuses on adolescent girls and disasters.'

There were 90 disasters per year in the 1970s and almost 450 in the last decade;² 95 per cent of deaths caused by disasters take place in the developing world. An increasingly youthful population means that children and young people bear the brunt of this and for them the negative effect of disasters can last, if they survive, for the rest of their lives.

Disasters and crises of course have a negative effect on everyone involved. People die and are injured, lose their families and their livelihoods. But if you are female, and particularly if you are an adolescent, disasters and crises may put you at greater risk than if you are male; especially in those societies where girls are already less privileged than their brothers. The reason can be summed up in one simple word: power. It is the relative powerlessness of women and children in many societies that makes them more vulnerable during disasters. In general, women and girls are 14 times more likely than men and boys to die in a disaster.³ In 2010, a study in Pakistan found that 85 per cent of those displaced by floods were women and children,⁴ and during the Asian tsunami in 2004, up to 45,000 more women than men died. The London School of Economics (LSE) research of 141 countries found that boys generally received preferential treatment over girls in rescue efforts.⁵ It quotes a story of a father 'who, when unable to hold on to both his son and his daughter from being swept away by a tidal surge in the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh, released his daughter because "[this] son has to carry on the family line"'.⁶

How disasters affect adolescent girls

For many adolescent girls, a major disaster simply adds to the individual risks they have to face in everyday life. This is especially true if they come from poor families, though violence and discrimination can affect girls regardless of their background.

Worldwide, more than a quarter of girls experience sexual abuse and violence; 65 million are still not in school; and in the developing world, one in every three is married before her 18th birthday.⁶

The numbers of girls and young women whose lives are affected by disasters, whether flood, famine, earthquake or war, mean that the pursuit of gender equality – equal access to health, education and participation – needs to be vigorously enforced by humanitarian workers and funded by donor governments and agencies. We know from Plan's research for its 2013 report that it is girls whose schooling is most interrupted when disaster strikes and that it is girls' health that is most at risk. Respondents in our pan-African primary research study from six different countries all stated that girls suffer more from a disaster than boys. Adolescent girls stand 'in double jeopardy' – neither women nor children, their needs and rights tend to become invisible.

Sexual health and child marriage

Access to food and water, the priorities of humanitarian assistance, are key to girls' survival, but so too is access to education and to information about health, including sexual and reproductive health, and the provision of appropriate health services and supplies targeted at girls. Crucial too are the means to access those services, privacy and safe spaces, and a sense that their specific health needs are recognised and acted upon by those in power. In Haiti, for example, pregnancy rates in the camps were three times higher than the average urban rate previously; pregnancy among 15 to 19-year-olds is already a leading cause of death. During a disaster, girls may be forced into using transactional sex as a coping strategy, sexual violence increases, as does HIV, and access to sexual and reproductive health services decreases. A 2009 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report found that 10 to 14-year-old girls were more at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse than any other age group, and that girls under 16 were most at risk of complications in childbirth, which increased maternal mortality rates for this age group. For many adolescent girls, the whole topic of contraception is taboo.

When disaster strikes and poverty and insecurity increases, child marriage, which may also mean child pregnancy, is used by some families as a coping strategy – most of the 25 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered fragile states, or at high risk of natural disaster. There is international recognition that child marriage is a widespread problem, impacting on girls' educational opportunities and achievements as well as their health, but the link with disaster situations has not yet been fully recognised. Even though girls' increased vulnerability to gender-based violence in disasters and emergencies is recognised, measures to alleviate the situation are not being put in place. For



UNICEF/Asad Zaidi

In a disaster, women and girls are far more likely than their menfolk to become casualties or to suffer displacement

example, despite guidelines stating that there should be, there are not enough women in response and assessment teams. Nor are obvious protection measures, like better lighting around latrines, protection around water points, and working with men and boys, integrated sufficiently into humanitarian response.

How education is central to improving girls' lives

Education, before and after disaster strikes, is key to building resilience and aiding recovery. Its importance cannot be overrated. Education should be part of the first phase response and it should be funded properly. A study from West and Central Africa found that if you ask children 'What Makes You Happy?', they say education.⁷ Girls in our focus groups constantly stressed the need to get back to school 'so that we can be busy and normal again'. For this year's report, Plan conducted a financial analysis of humanitarian funding – 'Where Does the Money Go?' – which revealed that not only is the money for education comparatively low but the money actually received from donors is a small proportion of the funds asked for.

Our primary research also indicates that in most countries, it is girls who are pulled out of school during a disaster and who fail to return to school post disaster.

Perhaps if we had programmes helping people to realise the importance of girls' rights, and girls' rights to progress in their education after the age of 16, that would help families

to keep girls at schools... To go forward as a girl, you need an education.

– Udani, 20, Sri Lanka

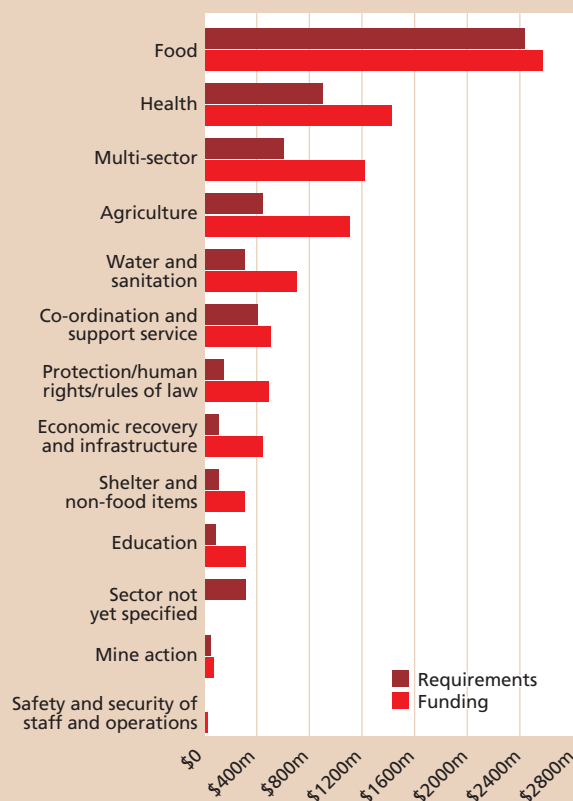
Plan's researchers in Bangladesh and Ethiopia asked girls what they felt was needed to keep them safe in disaster. They had three clear priorities:

1. Greater access to quality education: to enhance their knowledge, skills and capacity to adapt and reduce disaster risks; improve their prospects to pursue more resilient livelihoods; and safeguard their futures
2. Greater protection from gender-based violence: to ensure those in authority understand and respond to the protection risks exacerbated by disasters and a changing climate, including child labour, child migration, child marriage and sexual violence
3. Greater participation in climate change adaptation decision-making and risk-reduction activities: to ensure that the views of girls are listened to and their priorities acted upon in all decision-making that affects their well-being

Failing to listen to children in disasters and to differentiate between the different needs of boys and girls of different ages means that disaster response is less effective and wastes resources. As Valerie Amos, United Nations Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, says: 'There is an overwhelming tendency to report numbers in bulk – latrines built,

Figure 1

OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) consolidated and flash appeals: required funds c.f. actual received, 2012



Source: Plan

tons of food distributed, schools rehabilitated – without knowing who used those latrines, who ate the food and who went to school.'

Paradoxically, a disaster can be an opportunity for adolescent girls. According to research by UNICEF, girls in refugee camps in Chad, many of them first-time learners, attended school in greater numbers than boys. Childcare was provided and adolescent girls, who were also mothers as well as those looking after younger brothers and sisters, were able to participate in classes.

Because we are all together here, we can educate our girls. That is the silver lining of Darfur.

– A father in Chad

The same was true in Pakistan after the 2011 floods, where Plan established child-friendly spaces for children of various ages that included non-formal education, and psychosocial and recreational activities. As a result, in an area where there were traditional and religious barriers to girls' education, many girls, often for the first time, were able to attend these non-formal schools. In fact, more girls than boys participated and there was a gradual change in attitudes towards educating girls.

Conclusion

Simply surviving an earthquake, flood or drought is not the sole aim of humanitarian work. It must also be a priority for the humanitarian and development communities to ensure that those who survive, particularly the most vulnerable, have the support they need to come to terms with their loss and trauma, and have the resources they need to rebuild their lives as well as to prepare for future crises. As far as adolescent girls are concerned, this is not happening. Evidence from primary research demonstrates that the humanitarian and development communities are failing to address the needs of adolescent girls. They are failing to ensure they have the knowledge, skills and resources to be able to survive the impact of a potential flood, drought or earthquake. They are failing to provide for their needs when they are exposed to greater risks in the aftermath of a disaster. Girls who are healthy and educated can go on to be leaders for response and recovery within their communities. But girls who are forced to leave school early, who become ill, who cannot get access to contraception when they need it, who fall pregnant too young, or are forced to sell their bodies to survive face potentially disastrous consequences that will affect them not just in the disaster period, but for the rest of their lives.

I want someone who I can go to if there are problems. We should be able to tell our government that we need help, that we need shelter, food, jobs, school, places to wash privately. I want a way that I can be heard.

– Sheila, 16, Philippines⁸

Acknowledgement

This article is based on Plan's 2013 report, *In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent girls and disasters*, written by Nikki Van der Gaag (<http://plan-international.org/girls/reports-and-publications>).

Endnotes

- 1 'Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2013' report, *In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent girls and disasters*, is written by Nikki Van der Gaag and was published by Plan on 11 October 2013.
- 2 Development Initiatives 2011.
- 3 Peterson, K. 'From the Field: Gender issues in disaster response and recovery', *Natural Hazards Observer*.
- 4 Action Aid Pakistan (2011), *Rebuilding Lives Post 2010 Floods*.
- 5 Neumayer, E. and Plumber, T. (2007), *The Gendered Nature of Natural Disasters*, London: London School of Economics (LSE).
- 6 See p.18, *In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters*, Plan 2013.
- 7 Morgan, J. and Behrendt, A. (2009), Plan.
- 8 Jacquelyn Haver for Plan, 2013.

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