



# ADOLESCENT GIRLS **IN CRISIS** VOICES FROM BEIRUT

Summary Report



This report on **Girls in Crisis** is the fourth in a series commissioned by **Plan International<sup>1</sup>** and the only one to focus on **adolescent girls who are refugees**

**in a city. The urban environment brings particular challenges, especially in the context of Lebanon which hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world, including a recent influx of 1.5 million fleeing the conflict in Syria.**

In April 2019, UNHCR estimated that in Beirut alone there were 239,005<sup>2</sup> registered refugees, among a total population of 2,200,000.<sup>3</sup> Palestinian and Syrian refugees are in the majority and include Palestinian families who have been in Lebanon since 1949. They live alongside disparate refugee populations and a large number of Lebanese and migrant workers from lower economic backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> There has been significant strain on infrastructure and resources and this in turn can heighten inter-communal tensions, as different populations compete for housing, jobs and sheer subsistence.<sup>5</sup>

Within these urban refugee communities, and elsewhere, the unique impact of crisis on adolescent girls is often overlooked. This report, drawing on research carried out in three different research sites in Beirut and its suburbs - Shatila, Bourj Al Barajneh and Bourj Hammoud - in October and November 2018, explores the experiences of adolescent girls within two age brackets: 10-14 and 15-19-years old. How, do they access the services and opportunities they need and what barriers do they face? How does their age, nationality and particular refugee status, effect their rights and the opportunities available to them? It seeks to amplify their voices and perceptions of their lives and communities, and presents their views on how the humanitarian sector might respond to the challenges they face.

1 <https://plan-international.org/publications/adolescent-girls-crisis>

2 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>

3 <http://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/beirut-population/>

4 United Nations Development Programme. (2018). UNDP Administrator: Lebanon's development under pressure due to the Syria Crisis. Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/undp-administrator-lebanon-s-development-under-pressure-due-syria-crisis>

5 *Violence in the City: A Systematic Review of the Drivers of Violence against Displaced Populations in Urban Crisis and Post-crisis Settings*: IRC JANUARY 2017

## WHAT DID THE GIRLS TELL US?

**THEY DON'T FEEL SAFE:** At home and in public spaces girls report experiencing, witnessing and perpetrating violence; their fear, and expectation, of harassment and sexual violence against girls is high.

*"Honestly, I only feel safe with my mum or dad. Nothing else. Just my parents. I feel very scared alone."*

**LEBANESE GIRL, 13, BOURJ HAMMOUD**

*"No, we're too afraid [to go out alone]. There are always drunk men who harass us and even the ones who aren't drunk harass us."*

**SYRIAN GIRL, 18, BOURJ AL BARAJNEH**

## MORE THAN HALF

**OF ALL SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID GIRLS OF THEIR AGE FACE PHYSICAL VIOLENCE, SEXUAL VIOLENCE, SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND EMOTIONAL OR VERBAL ABUSE WHERE THEY LIVE.**

**THEY SUFFER FROM DISCRIMINATION:** Not only does their age and gender have an impact on girls' everyday lives so too does their nationality, and how long they have lived in Beirut. Syrians, who are recent arrivals, are particularly affected by discrimination and verbal abuse but **it is widespread across the different nationalities.**

*"We'll be walking on the street, and they'll tell us we're Syrian and stuff, and we're also sensitive you know. They discriminate and differentiate between Lebanese and Syrians, and why they're doing that, I don't know."*

**SYRIAN GIRL, 17, BOURJ HAMMOUD**

*"We felt discrimination from the other students in the old schools. Not just in schools, if you say a Palestinian word we're mocked. They ask us if we're Palestinian, laugh and leave."*

**PALESTINIAN GIRL, 14, SHATILA**

**THEY FEEL ISOLATED:** Girls' **freedom of movement is restricted**, particularly as they get older. This is primarily due to the security concerns of the girls and their parents, and to entrenched ideas of what is appropriate for adolescent girls.

*"Some girls aren't allowed out of the house, they stay stuck inside."*

**SYRIAN GIRL, 17, BOURJ HAMMOUD**

*"My brother has a lot more freedom than me."*

**PALESTINIAN GIRL, 16, BOURJ AL BARAJNEH**

*“When I complain to my father, he says, ‘he’s a boy.’ What does that mean?”*

PALESTINIAN GIRL, 14, BOURJ AL BARAJNEH

It means that adolescent girls, unlike boys, are often housebound. They cannot socialise or find the support they need. This has an impact on access to healthcare, information and school attendance and, in turn, exacerbates feelings of unhappiness and loneliness, again particularly among older girls.

*“Yes, if he’s [a boy] upset, he can just go outside with his friends. But if a girl is sad, she’ll just lock the door on herself and cry.”*

SYRIAN GIRL, 16, BOURJ HAMMOUD

69%

OF GIRLS SAID THEY FELT UNSAFE TRAVELLING AROUND THE CITY ALONE DURING THE DAY.

87%

FELT UNSAFE AT NIGHT TIME.

**EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT:** Enrolling at school is not straightforward and difficulties are heightened for more recently arrived refugees, and as girls get older. **Lack of parental permission, limited places, cost, administrative barriers to enrolment and child marriage** are among the many reasons why girls do not attend school. Adolescent girls, however, clearly understand how important education is.

*“I like learning and seeing my friends. Otherwise I would stay home and not see anyone.”*

SYRIAN GIRL, 15, BOURJ AL BARAJNEH

*“... the girl nowadays, her weapon is her education.”*

PALESTINIAN GIRL, 13, BOURJ AL BARAJNEH

**THEY ARE OPTIMISTIC:** Girls are ambitious for their own futures: Syrian girls in the focus group discussions talked of **wanting to be doctors, lawyers, tailors, engineers and teachers**. Adolescent girls are determined to contribute towards their communities and are also engaged with the social, political and cultural issues that affect their lives.

*“As long as I’m learning and working towards fulfilling my future, I’m hopeful because I’m making progress.”*

YOUNG LEBANESE WOMAN, 19

*“I like knowing what’s going on in the country and staying informed ... We talk about the members of parliament and ministers and what they do.”*

YOUNG LEBANESE WOMAN, 19

## CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This research in Beirut demonstrates clearly that adolescent girls in crisis are not a homogenous group. They have different opinions, experiences and needs which vary not only because they are individuals but according to their age, nationality and location.

The recommendations that follow are drawn from the priorities of adolescent girls and build on their strengths as well as acknowledging their vulnerabilities.

- **Participation:** Listen to girls, recognise that adolescent girls have distinct needs and ensure that their voices and perspectives are included in decision-making, programme design and implementation. Girls living in urban refugee communities may be harder to find but reaching out to adolescent girls, including the most vulnerable, from the very beginning of any response, must be prioritised.
- **Protection:** Tackle the root causes of gender inequality at family, community and legislative levels: aiming not only to improve the daily condition of girls but also to advance their position and value in society. Community projects need to be in place to prevent gender-based violence and harassment, including child marriage, and to mitigate the isolation and lack of opportunity for girls and young women that both the fear of gender-based violence, and the experience of it, engenders.
- **Education:** Schools must be adequately resourced and the barriers in place to prevent or discourage girls from refugee communities from attending school must be removed. The school curriculum should also actively combat all forms of discrimination. Violence in schools must be addressed, to provide a safe learning environment for everybody.
- **Health:** Healthcare, including mental health support, needs to be confidential, freely available and adolescent girl-friendly. Information about Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights is vital especially as the rates of child and early marriage are increasing.
- **Safe Spaces:** Adolescent girls want to be able to live free and full lives, and to support each other. The provision of dedicated safe spaces where girls can meet is crucial, as is ensuring girls’ safety in public spaces such as parks.



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**Cover photo:** A young refugee photographed in the Akkar region, northern Lebanon. © Plan International / Sima Diab

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No photographs were taken during the course of this research. Girls featured in images in the report are not the same as those that participated in the research.

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## Plan International in Lebanon

Plan International began operating in Lebanon to address the biggest issues faced by the most vulnerable children in refugee and host communities. There are currently around 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, causing a huge strain on the country's resources. Plan International Lebanon's response priorities are ensuring the most vulnerable children can get an education; working with communities to keep children safe from all forms of violence; supporting young people to learn skills, get good jobs, earn a living and play a meaningful role in society.

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## About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

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