

A young woman with dark skin and long, curly hair, wearing a red headband and a dark cardigan over a red and white striped shirt. She is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. Her right hand is resting on a wooden door frame. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

CLOSE TO CONTAGION

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON DISPLACED AND REFUGEE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

“I’m really worried about this COVID-19 pandemic because I live in a congested area where the majority of people are very poor. This pandemic, the way it’s spreading very fast, if it reaches here, many people will be infected, and it will be very difficult to control it.”
Rose, 19, Dzaleka Refugee Camp, Malawi



Introduction

Currently, as COVID-19 spreads across the world,¹ an unprecedented 76.7 million people are living as refugees,² or have been displaced inside their countries.³ Some 131 of the countries affected by COVID-19 have sizeable refugee populations and more than 80% of refugees are hosted in low- and middle-income countries including Uganda, Sudan, Pakistan and Turkey,⁴ with health systems that are ill-equipped to manage significant outbreaks.

Refugee and IDP camps are mostly chronically overcrowded and measures to avoid community transmission of the virus, such as physical distancing and frequent handwashing, are difficult to implement. The absence of basic amenities, such as clean running water and soap, insufficient medical personnel, and poor access to health information, let alone access to masks, will make avoiding infection virtually impossible. Also, in many host-countries, refugees' entitlement to healthcare and social protection systems are restricted or non-existent, which increases their vulnerability even further.

The concern about an outbreak of COVID-19 in the camps cannot be overstated.⁵ The pandemic has consequences for everyone, but some groups are particularly vulnerable. Evidence shows that the impact of COVID-19 on girls and women⁶ – on their health, safety and opportunities for education and decent jobs – is making already difficult lives increasingly unendurable.

**Kawsara, 15, washes her hands,
Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh
© Plan International**

“I tell my family members, friends, and neighbours to stay at home, wear face masks when going out and wash their hands frequently with soap. Our community understands the importance of handwashing, but we need an adequate supply of soap. It would be very helpful if the government and other agencies could distribute food items and sanitary pads in my community.” *Rebeka, member of a Youth Forum, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh*

How COVID-19 affects displaced girls and women

EDUCATION

Girls living in refugee camps or who are internally displaced, are already at a disadvantage in accessing education and, at secondary level, girls are only half as likely to enrol as their male peers.⁷ With the closure of schools due to COVID-19, a girl's access to both official and alternative forms of learning is further restricted. They have little or no opportunity to learn remotely due to limited connectivity and access to online resources.⁸ The closure of schools in refugee camps is also depriving girls of a protective environment, school meals and psychosocial support. Plan International's research shows that the longer-term effects of lockdowns on girls' education include increased rates of early, forced and child marriage.⁹

Over eight million refugee children are no longer able to attend school.¹⁰

LIVELIHOODS

Some refugee camps have significant movement restrictions which have resulted in a reduction of livelihood opportunities for refugee families: girls and young women, as well as working on family land, rely on trading and work as maids in nearby cities. COVID-19 combined with insecurity makes this impossible. Many refugee women, at least 25% of whom are heads of households,¹¹ are dependent upon acquiring and cultivating land within host communities, not necessarily nearby, as a critical source of food and income to meet basic needs. Even after authorities lift the movement restrictions, the potential economic damage in host communities could have lasting effects on the ability of refugees to make a living.

VIOLENCE

The incidence of intimate partner violence (IPV) and other forms of gender-based violence within homes is increasing, as movement restrictions and food and economic insecurity, increase tensions and bear down on pre-existing gender inequalities.¹² In Egypt, there are reports that in 25% of both national and Syrian refugees' households, girls and young women are suffering gender-based violence and abuse. Higher rates of IPV and child marriage are also being reported in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh.¹³ The fact that many essential social protection services and referral mechanisms are either severely reduced or completely stopped makes it even harder for young women and girls to get help.

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON GIRLS' AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN JORDAN

- In April 2020, UNFPA, Plan International and the Institute for Family Health commissioned a rapid assessment to measure the impact of COVID-19 on gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) among adolescent girls and young women from the refugee and Jordanian population. Key findings include:
- 69% respondents agree that GBV, particularly domestic violence has increased since the pandemic;
- Accessing GBV and SRHR services has become more difficult;
- Adolescent girls fear that the pandemic is compromising their education.

The report concludes that **“the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions have led to greater uncertainty, stress, and health and psychological risks for women and girls, many of whom already faced the challenges of entrenched gender inequality and discrimination”**.



Majd, 12, makes face masks in Azraq refugee camp, Jordan
© Plan International

Promoting the participation of adolescent girls and young women

Findings from consultations with adolescent girls and young women,¹⁴ show that, despite the challenges they face, adolescent girls demonstrate resilience, entrepreneurial skills, a desire to help others, optimism for the future. In refugee camps and settlements, in many different contexts, they are using their skills and understanding both in response to the COVID-19 crisis but also in addressing other issues – the lack of money, food and safety, which continually affects their lives.

“As a member of my youth club, I can help my community protect themselves from COVID-19. I can raise awareness about handwashing practices, maintaining hygiene and sneezing etiquette. However, this would not be enough in the camp. Our situation is not similar to any other part of the world. We all need to think differently to save ourselves.”
Kawsara, 15, Cox’s Bazar

- ▶ **Jordan - the Azraq refugee camp:** under some of the strictest lockdown conditions in the world young women and girls have taken on the responsibility of protecting and engaging some of the most vulnerable groups in the camp. When the lockdown came into effect, young women helped distribute sanitised handicraft kits to mothers and girls so that they could join group sessions on how to make masks. Via social media, young women in the camp are leading classes in parenting, life skills and literacy and youth club sessions. Additionally, girls in the camp have been taking on leadership roles as part of their Youth Committees. They have helped facilitate online life skills sessions for children that highlight issues such as girls’ rights, mental health, wellbeing, education and safe spaces.
- ▶ **Tanzania - Nyarugusu, Mtendeli and Nduta refugee camps:** older Burundian adolescent girl refugees are using their skills and experience to help others in the camps. This includes supporting vulnerable girls through peer to peer activities, collecting information on issues affecting girls through a children’s parliament and engaging with service providers to address the issues they have raised. With schools in refugee camps closed, young women and older adolescent girls are also involved in a mentorship programme that helps in distributing school materials and providing learning support to students and their parents at home. If there is an outbreak of COVID-19 they will play a critical role by providing additional child protection support to affected families.
- ▶ **Egypt:** during the current pandemic adolescent Syrian refugee girls and young women living in Upper and Lower Egypt and Greater Cairo, have been playing a vital role in disseminating awareness raising messages about COVID-19 and addressing the emotional impact of the curfew on their peers. In the Kalyoubya governorate, a youth-led initiative is using social media platforms to communicate child-friendly messages to children on COVID-19 prevention. In addition, young women are addressing the rising trend of sexual and gender-based violence by offering peer to peer support to adolescent girls and women and alerting them to any available services.



WORKING FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN: THE ROLE OF THE GLOBAL COMPACT ON REFUGEES AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IN THE COVID-19 RESPONSE¹⁵

The Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) is a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing to transform the way the world responds to refugee situations, benefiting both refugees and the communities that host them. The key principles of the GCR include responsibility sharing, protection and inclusion of refugees in national systems that must be underpinned by a strong age, gender and diversity responsive approach.¹⁶ Both the GCR and pledges made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum (GRF) can support refugees, especially girls and young women, in the response to the pandemic.

It is key that governments hosting refugees and internally displaced populations properly assess and respond to the short- and long-term consequences of COVID-19 in different refugee populations. In order to do so, it's essential to apply an age, gender and diversity lens. Despite the large numbers of adolescent girls so profoundly affected by ongoing crises around the world, it is rare that either their own communities, national governments or the humanitarian sector at large, pay much attention to them. There are very few examples of specific consultations and assessments that focus on the capacities, vulnerabilities and opportunities of adolescent girls living in refugee camps or

settlements. The GCR promotes gender equality and meaningful engagement of refugee women and girls and it is essential that this translates into action on the ground.

It is important that states live up to their commitments to the GCR to allow all refugees to have access to essential services during the COVID-19 crisis. Refugee hosting governments must be supported and held accountable for their obligations towards upholding the rights of displaced populations, particularly for ensuring that girls and young women can access essential services and have their voices heard during and after the COVID-19 crisis. It is also critical that pledges related to supporting protection services for girls and young women at risk of gender-based violence are upheld within the COVID-19 response to ensure that support for survivors is stepped up at a time of increased need.

**COVID-19 is a global crisis
and needs an international and
co-ordinated response.**

Recommendations

EVIDENCE

Governments and UN agencies should ensure that response plans for COVID-19 are informed by a comprehensive analysis of the short and long-term consequences of the pandemic, based on age, gender and diversity: including collecting data disaggregated for age, sex and disability. These considerations should be central to national responses, which must involve collaborating with civil society, including girls and young women themselves.

PROTECTION

Child protection risks and risks of gender-based violence, must be assessed, monitored and responded to during responses to COVID-19 in displacement camps and host communities and in quarantine situations. Monitoring of children and adolescent girls at increased risk of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect needs to be stepped up and those who are abused need to have somewhere to go and people to speak to.

HEALTH

Girls' and women's sexual and reproductive health and rights must continue to be prioritised as a life-saving intervention. This must include: access to contraception, menstrual health and hygiene management, antenatal and postnatal care, clean and safe childbirth and provisions for the clinical management of rape.

EDUCATION

Policy makers must be flexible in their approach to education to make sure that girls are not discouraged from returning to school. Future admissions procedures must be adapted to the particular challenges they face, including supporting pregnant girls and young mothers who often face stigma and discriminatory school re-entry laws. In displaced settings, where digital solutions are not accessible, governments must invest in distance learning approaches that are low-tech and gender responsive. This includes providing reading and writing materials to displaced families and using radio broadcasts.

PARTICIPATION

Supporting girls and young women's resilience and agency is critical to any effective preparation for, or response to, the current COVID-19 crisis, and other intersecting crises in refugee camps and settlements. National and humanitarian authorities must acknowledge girls' capabilities as leaders and

mentors, and recognise the value of the coping strategies they have developed. They are more than ready to play a significant role in the everyday survival and development of their refugee communities and must be given the opportunity to do so.

AID

National authorities should list humanitarian workers as key workers, excluded from stay-at-home orders wherever possible. Life-saving humanitarian activities for displaced people must continue and both pandemic and non-pandemic critical aid must be delivered.

FUNDING

States and organisations that promised more help for health, water, sanitation and hygiene, social protection and livelihoods at the Global Refugee Forum should consider accelerating these commitments as part of their response to the pandemic.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>
- 2 <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>
- 3 <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2020-IDMC-GRID-executive-summary.pdf>
- 4 <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>
- 5 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30791-1/fulltext?rss=yes](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30791-1/fulltext?rss=yes)
- 6 UN Secretary-General Policy Brief on impact of COVID-19 on women (April 2020)
- 7 <https://www.unhcr.org/herturn/> ; <https://www.planinternational.nl/uploaded/2019/06/Left-out-Left-behind-report.pdf?x65987>
- 8 https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHRP-COVID19_May_Update.pdf
- 9 Plan International, 'Living under lockdown: girls and COVID-19' <https://plan-international.org/publications/living-under-lockdown>
- 10 https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHRP-COVID19_May_Update.pdf
- 11 <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2020/5/4/gender-matters-covid-19s-outsized-impact-on-displaced-women-and-girls>
- 12 https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHRP-COVID19_May_Update.pdf
- 13 <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/urgent-call-gender-actions-covid-19-response-cox-s-bazar>
- 14 Plan International: Adolescent Girls in Crisis 2018 <https://plan-international.org/publications/adolescent-girls-crisis>
- 15 This section contains extracts from <https://www.globalcompactrefugees.org/article/role-global-compact-refugees-international-response-covid-19-pandemic>
- 16 <https://www.unhcr.org/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html>