

**Remarks and background for Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Ursula Mueller**  
**High-level panel on addressing the rights and needs of adolescent girls in crisis: Bridging the policy and programming gap**

*UN Headquarters, New York, 24 September 2018*

*As delivered*

We are here today because we all recognize that today's humanitarian crises are pushing tens of millions of adolescent girls closer to the sharp edge of vulnerability. Humanitarian assistance must respond to the specific needs, vulnerabilities and capacities of adolescent girls if it is to be effective.

Over the past year, I have visited a number of countries affected by crisis, including Myanmar, Central African Republic, Iraq and Mali. During these visits, I witnessed firsthand the challenges and obstacles that women and girls face in contexts of armed conflict and natural disasters. But what I saw also gave me hope – in the capacities of the women and girls I met, and in the innovative ways in which humanitarian organizations are working to deliver gender-responsive humanitarian action.

As we all know, adolescent girls in crisis settings face heightened risks to their safety, dignity and well-being. These risks include unwanted pregnancy, sexual violence, early and forced marriage, and interruption to their education.

Every day, more than 500 women and adolescent girls die from complications of pregnancy and childbirth in emergencies and fragile situations. At least one in five women and girls who are forcibly displaced will experience sexual violence or abuse.

An estimated 39 million girls living in crisis-affected countries cannot access education. A lifeline in times of turmoil, access to quality education provides girls protection and the opportunity to thrive. Yet, in crises, education is often one of the first services to be disrupted and the last to be restored.

In a refugee camp in Kachin State, in Myanmar, I met 15-year-old Nura, who was forced to leave school when her family was displaced by violence. She now lives in a cramped shelter with her parents and five siblings, and dreams of one day becoming an artist.

We in the international humanitarian community have a responsibility and an obligation to support girls like Nura, to help them realize their present and future potential.

In emergency response, adolescent girls need tailored programming to increase their access to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, and to build their resilience and protection. On top of targeted healthcare support and education, adolescent girls need safe spaces and counselling services; and livelihoods and skills training to help build their resilience.

So how can we ensure that humanitarian actors respond to the specific needs and priorities of adolescent girls? And what is OCHA doing on this front?

The humanitarian sector has come a long way in ensuring that its response is inclusive and meets the specific needs of diverse groups. We can no longer accept that while women and girls are often the first responders during an emergency, they are virtually absent at the strategic decision-making levels.

Key to accelerating progress is participation. The participation of adolescent girls and women in decision-making fora, needs assessments, feedback mechanisms and evaluations, is non-negotiable. Participation is vital if we are to make real advances to equality in humanitarian, peacebuilding and development.

Giving adolescent girls a voice in decision-making means that they are less likely to experience the increased isolation and more restricted mobility that is often the case in emergency settings. Instead, with the right kind of support, girls can rewrite traditional gender roles and become champions of their own destinies, by demanding access to school, livelihoods training, safe spaces and the health services they need.

As a lead coordinator, information manager and advocate for the UN system, a critical part of OCHA's mission is to ensure that international response meets the needs of all vulnerable groups in crises. This includes women and adolescent girls. OCHA is doing this in several ways, through advocacy and influencing; through programming, policies and guidance.

OCHA tries to ensure that its advocacy is directly informed by women and girls. We work to make sure adolescent girls and women's groups participate and are consulted in field visits, so their voices and priorities are heard.

On a recent field visit to Cameroon, where women and girls continue to experience staggering levels of sexual and gender-based violence, I met with women and their families who had been displaced by Boko Haram. NGOs and civil society groups briefed me on how they were working to support these women and girls. I have carried these stories with me in various forums, including this event today, with the firm belief

that much more can – and must – be done to make our humanitarian more inclusive, not only in Cameroon but in countries around the world.

Consultation with adolescent girls and women must extend to every stage of the humanitarian programming cycle, which is an ongoing process being taken forward by Humanitarian Country Teams and Humanitarian Coordinators.

This consultation starts with needs assessments. We have encouraged the collection of data disaggregated by sex and age, so that each country and region's Humanitarian Needs Overview and Humanitarian Response Plan reflects the needs of women and girls.

According to a 2017 study, 25 per cent of HRPs are gender-sensitive, and 70 per cent of them reflect programming that is at least partially informed by a gender analysis.

We need to bring these figures up to 100 per cent.

Gender reports also play an important role in gender-responsive planning. For instance, the Inter-Sector Coordination Group for the Rohingya Refugee Response provides regular gender reports based on discussion groups with adolescent girls. Plan International, has recently published three reports, which look at adolescent girls' experiences in the Lake Chad Basin region, the South Sudan crisis, and the Rohingya crisis in Cox's Bazar. They are an excellent example of best practice to follow.

To steer our progress in all these areas, work is taking place within individual humanitarian organizations as well as across the system.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee, a platform bringing together major UN agencies and NGOs, has played a critical role in advancing gender equality programming through standard-setting and guidance. Its GenCap Project is a crucial mechanism to promote gender equality programming, as is its newly endorsed Gender Handbook. And the IASC's 'Gender with Age Marker,' adopted in March of this year, evaluates to what extent programmes are addressing gender and age-related differences in humanitarian response. As these tools are widely rolled out in current and future crisis settings, I think we will see a significant shift in making humanitarian operations more inclusive and gender-responsive.

As we move towards greater inclusion and also towards localisation of aid efforts, it is more important than ever that we engage with local NGOs as well as women and adolescents' groups and networks on the ground. These groups and networks play a crucial role as first responders, information disseminators and advocates.

In Turkey, I saw firsthand the work of the Al Resala Foundation, which provides counselling, education access, and skills training to adolescent Syrian refugee girls and

women. In the Philippines, the inspirational Women in Emergencies Network, is engaged in advocacy, resource mobilization, and policy guidance on gender issues.

Moving forward, we will only achieve success if this work is supported with predictable, multi-year funding. To achieve better outcomes for adolescent girls, we must commit human, technical and financial resources to make gender-equality programming the norm in all humanitarian settings.

Thank you.