



state of world population 2015



# SHELTER FROM THE STORM

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A transformative agenda  
for women and girls in a  
crisis-prone world

## The State of World Population 2015

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# UNFPA

Delivering a world where  
every pregnancy is wanted  
every childbirth is safe and  
every young person's  
potential is fulfilled

# SHELTER FROM THE STORM

A transformative agenda for  
women and girls in a crisis-prone world

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# Foreword

More than 100 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance—more than at any time since the end of the Second World War. Among those displaced by conflict or uprooted by disaster are tens of millions of women and adolescent girls. This report is a call to action to meet their needs and ensure their rights.

While remarkable progress has been achieved during the past decade protecting the health and rights of women and adolescent girls in humanitarian settings, the growth in need has outstripped the growth in funding and services. Yet, these services are of critical importance, especially for very young adolescent girls, who are the most vulnerable and least able to confront the many challenges they face, even in stable times.

Under normal circumstances in some developing countries, a 10-year-old girl, for example, may be married off against her will, trafficked, separated from her family and all social support and have limited access to education, health or opportunities for a better life. When a crisis strikes, these risks multiply, and so do that girl's vulnerabilities. Her prospects go from bad to worse. She may become the target of sexual violence, infected with HIV, or pregnant the moment she reaches puberty. Her future is derailed.

Every 10-year-old girl, no matter where she is, has a right to health, dignity and safety, and 179 governments pledged in 1994 at the International Conference on Population and Development to uphold that right—in any

and every situation. Yet for too many years, humanitarian assistance has left the 10-year-old girl behind, vulnerable to unsafe childbirth, and violence with devastating consequences. Sexual and reproductive health and access to information are essential for any girl's safe transition from adolescence to adulthood. Imagine that 10-year-old 15 years later with her rights and health intact; now imagine her in a world where armed conflict, devastation and displacement deny her every human right, every opportunity, every dignity.

Abandoning her, or her community or country, is not an option. We are, in the end, one world, and governments have a responsibility to protect human rights and abide by international law. As global citizens, we have a duty to provide support and solidarity.

Today about three fifths of all maternal deaths take place in humanitarian and fragile contexts. Every day 507 women and adolescent girls die from complications of pregnancy and childbirth in emergency situations and in fragile States. And gender-based violence continues to take a brutal toll, shattering lives and prospects for peace and recovery.

Together we must transform humanitarian action by placing the health and rights of women and young people at the centre of our priorities. At the same time, we must invest heavily in institutions and actions that build girls' and women's human capital and agency and in the resilience of communities and nations over the long run so that when a new crisis strikes, disruption and dislocation may be minimized and recovery may be accelerated.

For its part, UNFPA remains committed to the full realization of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all women and girls, wherever they live, and under all conditions, crisis or otherwise, at all times. The surfeit of conflicts and disasters all around us today means that UNFPA is delivering a larger share of its services in crisis settings.

When women and girls can obtain sexual and reproductive health services, along with a variety of humanitarian programmes that

deliberately tackle inequalities, the benefits of interventions grow exponentially and carry over from the acute phase of a crisis well into the future as countries and communities rebuild and people reclaim their lives.

Together we must strive for a world where women and girls are no longer disadvantaged in multiple ways but are equally empowered to realize their full potential, and contribute to the development and stability of their communities and nations—before, during or after a crisis.

**Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin**

United Nations Under-Secretary-General and  
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UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund



Photo © UNFPA/Nezih Tavlas

# Overview

More than a billion people alive today have seen their lives upended by crisis. War, instability, epidemics and disasters have left a long trail of turmoil and destruction.

**R**ight now, more people are displaced by crisis than at any time since the cataclysm of the Second World War: an estimated 59.5 million. Natural disasters now affect 200 million people a year.

For some, the setbacks are temporary. For others, they may consume a lifetime. Refugees now spend an average of 20 years away from home.

Pregnancy and childbirth are additional vulnerabilities for women and girls in conflicts and crises. Sixty per cent of preventable maternal deaths take place among women struggling to survive conflicts, natural disasters and displacement.

In a series of international agreements, the world has affirmed the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls. That promise

encompasses upholding and delivering on these rights in all cases, at all times; humanitarian crises do not diminish this responsibility. Keeping that promise means guaranteeing that women and girls have access to comprehensive services before, during and after a crisis. What's needed in many crisis-affected countries are scaled-up commitment and action.

## In a fragile world, women and girls pay a disproportionate price

By many measures, more countries are considered fragile than five or six years ago, leaving them more vulnerable to conflict or the effects of disasters. Many factors make people and countries vulnerable. Being poor is one—over 1 billion people still live

## RISK

Photo © UNFPA/Sawiche Wamunza



in extreme poverty. This traps individuals and even whole countries so far down the ladder of development as to make any upward climb the most distant dream. It means decent work is unavailable, and the quality of services is unpredictable.

Geography is another factor. Some countries lie squarely in the path of natural disasters, which are increasing dramatically through climate change. Historic levels of urbanization have raised risks for city dwellers, especially the poor, many of whom live in poorly constructed informal settlements in fragile areas, such as on hillsides prone to mudslides.

For women and girls, compounding these and other factors are discrimination and gender inequality. To start with, women and girls have less of almost everything: income, land and other assets, access to health services, education, social networks, a political voice, equal protection under the law, and the realization of basic human rights.

When a crisis strikes, they are thus disproportionately disadvantaged and less prepared or empowered to survive or recover. During and after any kind of crisis, gender-based violence may soar, including in its use as a weapon of war.

Extreme financial hardship stemming from disaster or conflict can lead women to transactional sex or make them vulnerable to trafficking. A lack of even basic sexual and reproductive health

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When a crisis strikes, women and girls are disproportionately disadvantaged and less prepared or empowered to survive or recover.

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## WOMEN AND GIRLS ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY DISADVANTAGED



More than  
**100 MILLION**  
people in need of  
humanitarian assistance,  
**ONE QUARTER ARE  
WOMEN AND GIRLS,  
AGES 15 TO 49.**

### At heightened risk of

- Sexually transmitted infections, including HIV
- Unintended, unwanted pregnancy
- Maternal death and illness
- Sexual- and gender-based violence

services makes giving birth in crisis settings a potentially deadly proposition, even more so for adolescent girls.

All of these dangers share a common cause: a lack of respect for the human rights to which everyone is entitled, no matter their sex, age or any other distinguishing characteristic. These rights include the reproductive rights agreed by 179 governments at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, culminating in a groundbreaking Programme of Action, which guides the work of UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund.

### Women and girls face obstacles to sexual and reproductive health before, during and after crises

Of the more than 100 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in 2015, an estimated one quarter were women and adolescent girls of reproductive age. Assistance that fails to meet all of their needs, including those specific to gender and age, can hardly be considered effective.

To date, the supply of assistance aimed at meeting the sexual and reproductive health needs of women and girls has not kept pace with the demand. Remarkable progress in targeting humanitarian services to women and girls has been achieved in the past decade. Still, large gaps remain, in action and in funding.

Gender inequality and discrimination—by sex, age or other factors—are among the explanations, manifesting even in well-intentioned humanitarian responses. Interventions that fail to account for the different ways disasters and conflicts can affect different groups can end up perpetuating inequalities, such as when general health care is provided in a crisis, but not services related to pregnancy, childbirth or contraception, leaving already-disadvantaged women and girls in an even more precarious situation.

In the tumultuous early phase of a crisis, food, shelter and care for acute physical trauma often seem the most compelling needs, with gender or any other kind of discrimination something that



## RESPONSE

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