



MEETING THE NEEDS OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS

A needs assessment of displaced communities in Sittwe Township,
Rakhine State

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Cover image: Muslim girls attend a session at an IRC Women and Girls' Wellness centre in Phwe Yar Kone Muslim IDP camp, Sittwe, May 2017. Photo © Kaung Htet/IRC

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Introduction

Since late 2012, around 100,000 people in Rakhine state's Sittwe Township have been living in temporary camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), forced out of their homes following a wave of inter-communal violence between the state's Buddhist and Muslim communities. Since 2014, IRC's women's protection and empowerment (WPE) team has been providing emergency gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response services in displacement camps for Muslim and Rakhine IDPs. Response services have focused on case management for survivors and wider psychosocial support for women and girls, while prevention activities have focused on addressing the root and proximate causes of GBV through behavior change interventions with women, community leaders and male intimate partners.

Global evidence suggests that conflict and displacement can have an especially damaging impact on adolescent girls, increasing their exposure to exploitation and abuse and limiting opportunities for them to reach their full potential. For example, previous IRC studies among displaced communities in Rakhine indicate that early marriage among Muslim communities in particular has increased since displacement, both as a means to "protect" girls, and as a livelihoods coping strategy for families unable to support all their members. To date however, IRC's WPE programming has taken only limited account of the specific needs of adolescent girls; IRC does not currently implement any targeted adolescent-focused programming in Rakhine, and existing activities are often poorly-attended by this group. In order to address this gap, the WPE team decided to conduct a needs assessment to inform the design of better programming for adolescent girls in its target areas. To do this, the assessment aimed to explore the daily lives of adolescent girls in Sittwe's IDP camps; assess the barriers they face in accessing current WPE services; and better understand their needs and priorities.

As an exploratory study, the assessment relied on focus group discussions (FGDs) with adolescent girls in locations where IRC currently runs women and girls' wellness centres (WGWs). These were carried out by IRC's WPE team in August 2017. The team ran separate sets of FGDs with Rakhine and Muslim adolescent girls. This was because of the significant cultural and language differences between the two groups, as well as the different challenges and opportunities they face due to the specific circumstances of their displacement. Within each set of FGDs, girls were also separated by age (10-13 and 14-18) and schooling status (in school and out of school) in order to fully reflect the diversity of girls' experiences. In total, the team ran 3 groups with girls from Rakhine camps and 12 with from Muslim camps (see Table 1), with the sample tripled in Muslim camps to reflect the larger population and greater diversity within this group. This sampling approach and sample size was designed to capture as wide a range of perspectives as possible while respecting the limited time and resources available to the WPE team. The results of the assessment are therefore not representative of IRC's entire target population, but instead highlight important trends for further exploration and discussion. Each FGD consisted of between 6 and 12 participants, and was conducted in participants' first language by a female facilitator supported by a female note-taker. The team sought and obtained informed consent from all participants before starting discussions. The FGD guide used to facilitate discussions is included in Annex 1.

Table 1: Location and number of FGDs

Group	Older girls (aged 14-18)		Younger girls (aged 10-13)		Total
	In school	Out of school	In school	Out of school	
Rakhine	1	1	1	0	3
Muslim	3	3	3	3	12
Total	4	4	4	3	15

Findings

All FGDs followed a similar format: first, girls were asked to describe their daily lives. Then, they were asked to describe the main challenges and difficulties they face, and the people they could turn to for support when dealing with these challenges. Finally, they discussed the barriers and possible options for attending IRC activities, as well as what they would like to see in these activities. The following section discusses findings by ethnicity, and by school attendance (the reported experiences of girls of different ages were found to be broadly similar and are therefore presented together). A separate section also deals with out of school Muslim girls aged 14-18 who were also married, as their experiences differed substantially from those of their unmarried peers.

Adolescent girls in Rakhine camps

Girls in school (all ages)

In terms of their daily lives, Rakhine girls reported waking up, having breakfast prepared by their caregivers, and then attending government schools—either in the camp, or in some cases 20-30 minutes' walk away in Sittwe town. After school, the majority of girls reported helping their families with household activities such as cooking, as well as attending additional tuition and doing homework.

Discussing common difficulties they faced, this group focused primarily on the limited resources available to their households, and how this affected their schooling. They discussed the challenge of making regular fee payments to stay in school, and how some were unable to afford the cost of extra after-school tuition. Some also mentioned lacking the money to pay for stationery or school uniform, and reported missing school days in rainy season because they were unable to afford umbrellas. In addition to financial constraints, girls also mentioned verbal harassment by men on the way to and from school as a source of fear and discomfort. Turning to sources of support, this group were able to list the widest range of people out of all categories. This included parents, grandparents and siblings at home, teachers and friends at school, as well as neighbours, friends, community leaders, and NGO/UN staff in the wider camp community.

The main barriers for this group to attend IRC activities were time-related. Busy attending lessons and tuition, helping their families with domestic tasks, and in some cases working to supplement family income outside of school hours, these girls had limited time to attend IRC programme activities. However, they reported that it was feasible to attend activities during lunch breaks and on weekends/school holidays. Those who had already been able to attend activities described their experience of GBV education sessions with IRC, as well as antenatal and infant and young child feed education sessions with Save the Children. Reflecting on the types of activities they would like to see in the WGWC, they discussed a range of psychosocial activities—including drawing, games, competitions, and dancing—as well as educational resources—such as a small library, as well as vocational training around sewing and hair/beauty salon skills. Girls did not report that getting permission from caregivers to attend activities would be an issue.

Girls out of school, aged 14-18

In general, girls out of school described either taking on a larger burden of domestic tasks at home, or—especially as they got older—working to generate income for their families. Those going out to work either helped with their families' businesses in the camps, or went out to work in the shops of Sittwe's general market. Girls working outside the camp generally spent much longer at their place of work—9am to 6pm—compared to school—10am to 4pm.

In terms of difficulties, girls in this group reported lacking available free time for recreation, and feelings of regret about not being able to attend high school. In addition, some also reported issues around control and management of money in their households, reporting situations in which their fathers would demand money for alcohol despite contributing little to household income, leading to frequent arguments with their mothers. This group also reported a narrower range of people

they could turn to for support, listing mothers and grandparents at home, along with community leaders and NGO/UN staff in the camp.

As above, the main barriers for out-of-school girls wanting to attend IRC activities were time-related, with household labour and daytime jobs taking priority. Participants reported that it would be possible to attend activities on Sundays in cases where girls at work were allowed a day off, and that some girls would be willing to stop work and attend activities that would contribute to their ability to earn income, such as vocational training. In most cases participants emphasized the need to negotiate timing of activities further with the IRC team. Discussing what kinds of activities they would like to see at the WGWC, participants in this group focused mainly on vocational activities such as sewing, hair/beauty, dress design, and computer studies and language courses. Significantly, some married adolescent girls also reported that the WGWC gave them opportunities to discuss problems in their family lives and get psychosocial support.

Access to information around sexual and reproductive health and GBV among Rakhine adolescent girls

Some adolescent girls reported owning phones, while others shared phones with members of their families. In general, girls reported that they could best be reached directly through house to house visits.

Girls reported accessing information on reproductive healthcare from mothers, grandmothers, older friends who had already married, library books, and from NGO staff (specifically IRC and save the children). IRC was the only reported source of information on GBV.

Adolescent girls in Muslim camps

Girls in school (all ages)

In general, girls in school reported attending either NGO-run temporary learning centres from 10am to 4pm, or the government middle/high school in Thet Kae Pyin—running from 7am to 12pm. Some younger girls also reported attending religious education in the morning before attending school. After school, girls reported helping their households with domestic chores—including caring for younger siblings, fetching water, and cooking. In the evenings, they did homework and in some cases attended additional tuition sessions.

In some aspects, the difficulties reported by in-school adolescent girls in Muslim areas were very similar to their Rakhine counterparts. Lack of money left many unable to afford stationery or school uniforms, and unable to take part in critical after-school tuition sessions. On the way to and from school, they likewise experienced regular harassment from men and boys. However, they also reported additional problems related specifically to the environment of Muslim IDP camps, where people live in densely-packed communal shelters, using communal water and sanitation (WASH) facilities, have limited livelihood opportunities, and are subject to heavy restrictions on freedom of movement. Participants reported that girls would in some cases go to morning classes hungry, since unreliable household income from casual day labour did not always allow for the household to have breakfast every day. After school, some girls reported struggling to focus on their homework after school due to their cramped living conditions, especially when their parents were arguing. More broadly, they also reported safety fears around using communal latrines at night, linked in part to a lack of adequate lighting. In addition, some discussed the psychological burden of living in overcrowded conditions under movement restrictions, describing life as lived “as in a cage where birds are kept” and expressing a desire to return to their communities of origin. As with their Rakhine counterparts, Muslim girls in school could name a relatively broad range of sources of support, including parents and siblings at home, teachers and friends at school, and friends and NGO staff in the wider community.

Participants cited lack of time as a key barrier to attending IRC activities, with schoolwork and with domestic activities occupying a large part of their days. Some also reported that their parents were reluctant to let them attend. Discussing ways to overcome these barriers, they suggested opening centres on weekends, running more activities during school holidays, and running sensitization activities with reluctant parents—including inviting them to education sessions. For WGWC activities, participants asked for a focus on games, painting, poetry, singing, competitions, and physical exercise, as well as vocational activities such as sewing training.

Unmarried girls out of school (all ages)

Unmarried girls out of school reported a daily life revolving around household labour, starting early in the morning with trips to the market to buy household supplies for the day, followed by preparing lunch. In the afternoons, they took part in various household activities including caring for younger siblings, fetching water and in some cases venturing outside the camp to search for firewood—as well as taking a nap or playing friends. This was followed by another round of meal preparation in the evenings. Some participants also reported engagement in various forms of casual labour.

As with out of school Rakhine girls, participants expressed sadness at being unable to attend school. They also explained that this had sometimes led to the breakdown of friendships, as they began to be looked down on by their peers who had continued their schooling. Like their in-school counterparts, they reported harassment by men when going about their daily activities outside the household. They also reported fears around leaving the camp to collect firewood, sharing stories of girls who had been sexually assaulted while doing so. Inside the household, they also reported instances where girls were beaten by their parents in punishment for playing instead of doing household chores. More widely, they spoke of feeling sad about being unable to attend school, and more generally about the poverty experienced by their households. Compared with girls in school, they also listed a much narrower group of people they could turn to for support, which was in general limited to parents and grandparents, siblings, and friends.

Time pressures were again presented as the main barrier to attending activities, with participants busy with household labour, care of siblings, and in some cases casual labour outside the home. As with other Muslim groups, resistance from parents was also reported as a major issue. Suggested ways to overcome these barriers included holding sessions in the afternoons when participants generally had some free time, as well as on weekends. As above, they also reported that persuading parents to allow their children to attend sessions was critical. In terms of suggested activities at the WGWC, participants focused on vocational training activities such as snack making, fishing net production, and sewing classes. They also wanted to see psychosocial activities such as games, storytelling, drawings and competitions, as well as education sessions focusing specifically on violence and on early marriage.

Married girls out of school (ages 14-18)

Daily life for married adolescent girls revolves largely around household labour and in some cases caring for young children. In the mornings, they reported shopping for their households at the market, followed by preparing food for lunch, and washing clothes/cleaning the house. During the afternoon they would also find time to pray and talk to their neighbours, before cooking food for dinner. Some also reported leaving the house to earn money as domestic labour in other people's houses, as casual labourers, or by working as street vendors for vegetables or fish.

Participants discussed facing significant challenges associated with their domestic lives. For those engaging in casual labour, having to simultaneously take on the majority of domestic chores and work outside the home led to long, exhausting days. Those with babies spoke of their frustration at being unable to leave the home to work or even go to the toilet for fear of leaving their children unattended at home. Many also discussed the psychological burden of trying to raise a young family without adequate livelihood opportunities, explaining that “it’s like hell, living with no job, with a baby, and without money to buy the things we need.” These challenges reportedly led to frequent arguments with their husbands. Some also reported that their husbands would also beat them for a variety of reasons. In general, married participants expressed regret at having married so early.

At the same time, they also expressed fears about the possibility of their marriage ending in divorce. In terms of possible sources of support, married adolescents listed family members, neighbours, community leaders, and IRC staff.

The main barriers to participating in IRC activities were a lack of free time due to household and work responsibilities, the difficulty of moving around outside the house while caring for infants, and difficulty getting permission from their husbands. Those engaged in casual labour also raised the unpredictability of available work as an additional challenge. Possible solutions to these challenges included flexible timing of activities, as well as negotiating with husbands to allow them to attend. Participants' preferred activities at the WGWC included education sessions around GBV and early marriage—with those who had been able to attend remarking on the importance of these activities in particular. In addition, participants focused on a need for vocational training activities such as sewing, snack making, and fishing net production.

Access to information around sexual and reproductive health and GBV among Rakhine adolescent girls

A minority of Muslim adolescent girls reported owning phones. While others reported sharing phones with members of their families, these did not work all the time. In general, girls reported that they could best be reached directly through house to house visits.

Girls reported accessing information on reproductive healthcare from mothers, grandmothers, sisters-in-law, and older friends who had already married. IRC was the only reported source of information on GBV, with the exception of information on human trafficking provided by Save the Children.

Summary and recommendations

This section presents a short thematic summary of findings, coupled with recommendations on how current and future approaches could address some of the key issues identified.

Access to Information: Girls across both communities received information on reproductive health through female family members, friends or teachers as well as SCI and IRC and some publicly available written material (library book). Some girls had their own phones but others shared with families. Girls in Rakhine communities are more likely to have access to working phone. House to house visits and passing information through others were also key way of communicating information about activities.

Recommendations

- Consider introducing technology-based activities into programming, particularly in Rakhine camps. Given family's access to phone, safety would have to be considered in the design of the activity but Facebook/messaging is potentially an effective way of keeping girls in contact and engaged in activities between sessions and when they are unable to attend due to work or family commitments. Education modules (e.g. basic literacy) could be delivered through an app, particularly for girls out of school who expressed a desire to return to education.
- Ensure sexual and reproductive health sessions are targeted at women across all ages, not just girls. This will help to ensure a supportive environment in the home for girls to apply their new knowledge and make positive changes in health and hygiene practices.

Financial Barriers: In both communities, girls commented on families' financial difficulty in paying tuition or providing supplies to enable uninterrupted school attendance. For example, the lack of a spare uniform meant that some girls did not attend school when their only one was wet in rainy season, or lack of umbrella meant more likely to miss school during rainy season for the same reason. Old or worn uniforms were also a source of shame and embarrassment to girls among their peers. High rates of early marriage were identified as a negative coping mechanism employed by families in response to situations of financial hardship.

Recommendations

- Include torches and umbrellas (during rainy season) in Dignity Kits. Torches will help address security concerns regarding lack of lighting when accessing bathrooms during the night. Umbrellas may help contribute to school attendance rates by ensuring girls' school uniform and materials are dry and undamaged.
- Expand economic empowerment programming for women to support increased household income and engage parents in programming to foster their support for girls continued attendance at sessions. Ensure this is coupled with gender discussions with men and husbands regarding financial management in the home to mitigate the risk of economic empowerment programming being a source of conflict within families.

Availability: All groups commented on a lack of spare time to attend sessions whether due to school, child caring and domestic duties and/or paid employment. Saturday and Sunday and summer school holiday were identified as the best time for girls in school. For girls in school, lunch breaks were identified as a possible suitable time for sessions with some already attending during their breaks. Girls in Muslim communities who were employed were more likely to have spare time in the afternoon after their work day ends. Both in-school and out-of-school girls had child care duties (whether siblings or their own children) which limited their availability. In some cases, the families or husbands of Muslim girls were not supportive of them attending sessions and prevented it.

Recommendations

- Explore opportunities for expanding lunchtime sessions for girls currently in school subject to feasibility (egg. proximity to school). Increase food allocation during lunch break sessions to ensure girls are adequately fed.
- Provide child care during activities to allow the full participation of girls with children/ child care duties.
- Greater engagement with parents and husbands of girls, particularly in Muslim communities. Ensure information on IRC activities is provided to family members through house to house visits and information sessions. Consider engaging parents and husbands more substantively in IRC programming whether through PFI, Coffee and Tea, Girl Shine, expanded MHPSS activities with men to encourage familiarity with and support for IRC activities and girl' participation in them.

Safety and wellbeing: Girls in Muslim camps were concerned about their safety when accessing toilets at night because of lack of lighting, while girls in both communities cited poor quality and cramped shelter as safety concerns, increasing risk of experiencing or being exposed to GBV. Girls in both communities reported harassment on the way to schools from men and boys. Rakhine girls associated this with alcohol use. The use of family income for alcohol by husband/father was reported a source of conflict in the family of Rakhine communities. The use of violence (beating) by parents against children as punishment for failing to satisfy domestic duties was reported. Participants with children raised concerns about using bathroom facilities during the day when no one was at home to care for the child, indicating child protection concerns. Married girls in Muslim communities expressed great concern and a sense of despondency towards their situation. Married girls with children cited confinement to the house because of their child caring duties as a source of unhappiness with some along with general regret at having married at a young age. Male unemployment and poverty were also a great concern which contributed to conflict within the house. Intimate partner violence (beating) was also associated with early marriage. Married Muslim girls raised concerns about getting divorced, stating that many couples were divorced and they felt worried about the thought of becoming like them.

Recommendations

- Conduct safety mapping and planning with girls regarding routes to school
- Further engagement with CCCM Cluster regarding issues of privacy, safety and security for girls and women related to shelter quality and camp infrastructure including lighting.
- Explore divorce in camps among Muslim camps, possible stigma and discrimination faced by divorced women and the consequences of this on their specific vulnerabilities.
- Ensure GBV responses including technical guidance materials recognize the distinct vulnerabilities and needs of girl survivors and integrate with Caring for Child Survivors guidelines. Provide training and technical support to IRC health teams and other health actors in Caring for Child Survivors.
- Adapt and implement Girl Shine to in and out of school girls to enable a more comprehensive approach to early marriage prevention that includes engagement with parents, life-skills training and mentoring. Couple this with expanded women's economic empowerment programming that is based on an assessment of sustainable livelihood options available in the context of Sittwe IDP camps. Coupled this with stronger coordination with livelihood actors in camps. Run Girl Shine and PFI in parallel, and incorporate positive parenting component into PFI which includes participation of adolescent girls. Coordinate with Child Protection actors in the design and implementation of this.