

Reproductive Health for Young People in War Zones

Reproductive health care saves lives, especially in conflicts or natural disasters.

Being young is tough but it should not be life-threatening. Young people are creative, energetic and resilient; listen to what they have to say and help them help themselves.

Why does it matter?

Young people (ages 10-24) who are forced to flee their homes during war are often exposed to violence and poverty and are separated from their families. Without basic societal supports such as family, schools and health care, young people may be more vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation. Young people should not be seen as a burden or a problem: they can be catalysts for change in their communities.

Moses, 17, a former child soldier from Uganda said: "When they took us away, many of the girls were raped and forced to become the 'wives' of rebel commanders. They also forced us to rape. I got a girl pregnant, but the baby died in the poor conditions of the bush. We are all afraid we got many diseases in captivity, but health care here in the camp is not good. There isn't enough medicine, and girls especially are afraid to go for care. They are ashamed and cannot pay. Some boys are raping girls in the camps, and some young people are having sex willingly. Many girls are getting pregnant very young, and they are not going to the doctor until the last minute. Some die giving birth. The girls are already malnourished and cannot care for their children, and many die very young."

Too young to be mothers

- Every year, 14 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 become mothers without the assistance of a doctor or trained professional.¹
- Girls under 16 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their twenties.

The burden of HIV/AIDS is on the young, girls in particular

- Every 14 seconds, a young person is infected with HIV/AIDS; that's 6,000 youth infected every day.²
- In sub-Saharan Africa, two-thirds of newly infected youth aged 15-19 are female.³

Girls are recruited, too

- One in four child soldiers in Sierra Leone were girls. The majority was recruited as soldiers, cooks, cleaners and forced sexual partners, otherwise known as "bush wives."⁴
- From the beginning of the conflict in Uganda, an estimated 25,000 children have been abducted in the northern region. Of those abducted, 30 percent were girls, of whom 1,000 became pregnant during captivity.⁵

¹ UNFPA, et al. [World Population Day - Joint Statement by UNFPA, European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighborhood Policy and the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid](#). July 2006.

² Ibid.

³ C. Shaw, P. Aggleton. [Preventing HIV/AIDS and Promoting Sexual Health: Among Especially Vulnerable Young People](#). Geneva, WHO, July 2002.

⁴ UNFPA. [State of the World Population 2005: The Promise of Equality](#). New York, 2005, 79.

⁵ F.T. Holst-Roness. [Violence against girls in Africa during armed conflicts and crises](#). ICRC, Addis Ababa, 2006.

What should be done?

- * Humanitarian workers should be able to ensure a safe and supportive environment that includes reproductive health care and involves young people in decisions that affect their health.
- * Particular attention must be paid to girls, including girl mothers and orphans.
- * Young people are entitled to comprehensive, confidential and youth-friendly services.
- * Humanitarian workers should involve parents and community members so that they too are receptive and supportive of young people's reproductive health.

A Model Youth Center

The Straight Talk Foundation's Gulu Youth Center in northern Uganda reaches out to young people through youth clubs and peer educators. The Center offers recreation such as volleyball and basketball; entertainment with music and dancing; health education through radio; and free sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning and testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections. The Center's success shows the importance of youth-friendly services to increase young people's use of health services, the need to work with community members to enhance understanding for young people's unique issues, and the value of paying attention to and supporting the particular needs of displaced young people.



Having fun at the Gulu Youth Center

What can I do?

- * **Listen to their voices!**
 - o Start by meeting and talking to young people to see what they want and how they can help themselves.
- * **Get informed!**
 - o Subscribe to *Youth InfoNet* to learn more about current issues by sending an email to youthwg@fhi.org.
- * **Take action!!**
 - o Ask congress to generously fund life-saving reproductive health care for refugee women and girls in the foreign aid budget. <http://capwiz.com/wc/home/>

Reproductive Health Care Saves Lives