

POLICY BRIEF

SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT GIRLS' WELL-BEING IN CLIMATE- AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED AREAS OF EAST AND WEST AFRICA

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Key messages

- In East and West Africa, climate change and conflicts are disrupting traditional livelihoods, destabilising communities, and exacerbating gender-specific vulnerabilities. In these contexts, adolescent girls are facing significant and compounding barriers to achieving well-being.
- Evidence shows that investing in adolescent girls' well-being and development can lead to a multitude of benefits for their families, communities and the girls themselves. However, there remains limited evidence linking specific interventions to measurable improvements in adolescent girls' well-being – especially in face of sudden shocks such as displacement and climate-related disasters.
- Despite these gaps, there are practices that show promise in supporting adolescent girls' well-being in climate- and conflict-vulnerable contexts. They include responding to adolescent girls' mental health challenges and needs, addressing social norms and barriers that limit education and economic opportunities, investing in integrated multi-sectoral interventions that address the complex needs of adolescent girls, and working with community and institutional support systems.



Introduction

Adolescent girls in climate- and conflict-affected areas of East and West Africa face significant barriers to achieving financial, psychosocial, health and educational well-being. They are disproportionately affected by the intersecting impacts of climate change and conflict. These include resource scarcity, heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, and reduced access to education and healthcare. In these contexts, adolescent girls are also challenged by displacement, early marriage, discriminatory cultural norms, and limited access to resources which constrain their opportunities to build resilience and thrive.

In this brief, we highlight promising practices, programmatic gaps and recommendations for supporting the well-being of adolescent girls in climate- and conflict-vulnerable pastoral areas of East and West Africa. These insights are drawn from a desk review and targeted key informant interviews (KIIs).

DEFINING ADOLESCENTS

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2014) defines adolescents as individuals aged 10 to 19 years. This age group is further categorised into three stages: early (10–14 years old), middle (15–17 years old) and late (18–19 years old) to account for physical, social and psychological developments. In our review, we find that the evidence reviewed does not often disaggregate findings by adolescent stages. Future research should more intentionally consider these different development stages to design more targeted interventions.

The desk review and KIIs were guided by two overarching questions

1. Why invest in adolescent girls' well-being and resilience in climate- and conflict-vulnerable pastoral areas in East and West Africa?
2. What works to support the financial, psychosocial, health and educational well-being and resilience of adolescent girls in these contexts?

In total, 53 documents were identified using a structured protocol focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, evaluation reports and grey literature. Between May and July 2024, 11 key informants were interviewed drawing on adolescent community of practice, researchers, evaluators and implementing partners. The desk review and KIIs were conducted in tandem, with each approach informing the other. The desk review informed our KII

guides and areas for further probing, while the KIIs helped to identify additional resources, triangulate initial findings, and connect with other potential informants.

Why invest in adolescent girls' well-being and resilience in climate- and conflict-vulnerable areas in East and West Africa?

Climate change and conflicts exert profound and overlapping impacts on the well-being of adolescent girls, especially in vulnerable areas of East and West Africa. These dual stressors disrupt traditional livelihoods, destabilise communities and exacerbate gender-specific vulnerabilities. Changing weather patterns, including prolonged droughts and erratic rainfall, have significantly disrupted agriculture and livestock rearing, the primary sources of livelihood in pastoral regions (OECD, 2022).

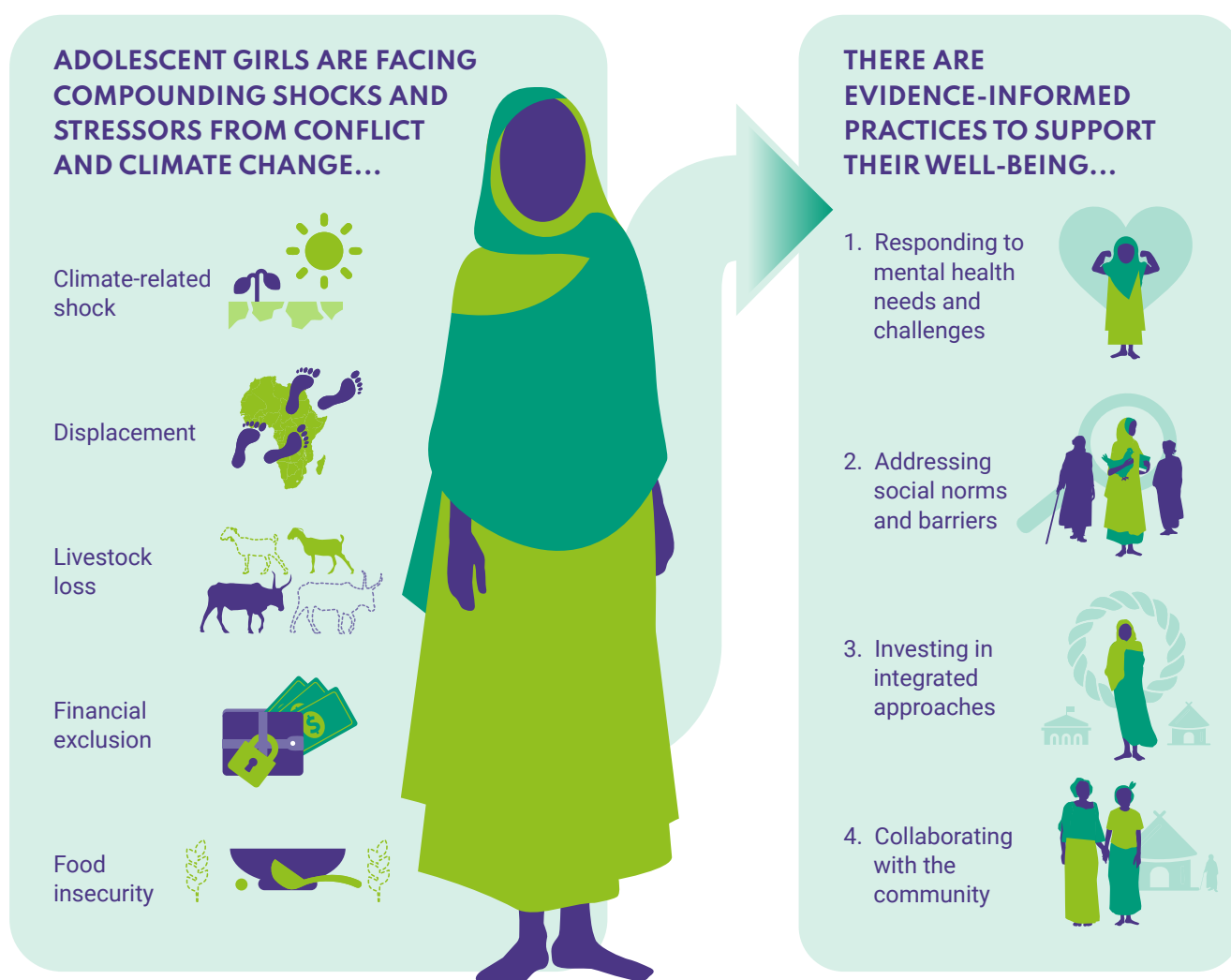
This has resulted in widespread food insecurity and heightened poverty, disproportionately affecting girls who are often deprioritised in resource allocation during times of economic strain (Kwauk et al., 2019). The resulting instability is forcing families to adopt survival strategies that increase girls' vulnerabilities, such as withdrawing them from school or arranging early marriages to offset economic burdens. Climate-induced displacement compounds these risks, with adolescent girls in displaced settings facing heightened exposure to violence, exploitation and gender-based violence (Abdulai, Mokitimi and de Vries, 2024).

The absence of stable living arrangements and protective community structures leaves them vulnerable to abuse and trafficking, further undermining their well-being. In turn, adolescent girls in climate- and conflict-vulnerable areas of East and West Africa are often caught in cycles of poverty and inequality, impacting not only the girls but also their families and communities.

What works to support the financial, psychosocial, health, and educational well-being and resilience of adolescent girls in these contexts?

Evidence shows that investing in adolescent girls' well-being and development can lead to a multitude of benefits for their families, communities and the girls themselves. However, there remains inadequate evidence linking specific interventions to measurable improvements in adolescent girls' resilience and well-being (Kwauk et al., 2019). Few studies explore how interventions targeting adolescent girls can be modified to respond effectively to sudden shocks, such as displacement or climate-related disasters (OECD, 2022).

FIGURE 1: FROM COMPOUNDING SHOCKS TO EVIDENCE-INFORMED SUPPORT: STRENGTHENING ADOLESCENT GIRLS' WELL-BEING IN CLIMATE- AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED AREAS



Source: Authors

Despite these gaps, the desk review and KIIs highlighted practices that were promising in supporting the financial, psychosocial, sexual reproductive and educational well-being of adolescent girls in climate- and conflict-vulnerable contexts.



1. Responding to adolescent girls' mental health challenges and needs

Mental health challenges, often exacerbated by displacement and conflict, are a critical but under-addressed issue for adolescent girls in fragile contexts. In Sudan, the absence of child and adolescent mental health services limits their ability to process trauma and build resilience (Abdulai, Mokitimi and de Vries, 2024). Addressing the psychosocial needs of adolescent girls, particularly those affected by trauma and displacement, is vital for their overall development.

Safe spaces and psychoeducation programmes have proven effective in helping girls process their experiences. The Writing for Recovery (WfR) initiative in Kenya demonstrated that structured writing activities reduced symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and improved participants' quality of life (Getanda and Vostanis, 2020). In Nigeria, trauma-focused counselling and social skills training for displaced adolescents have enhanced psychological functioning (Lawrence and Falaye, 2020).

These interventions addressed immediate psychological needs but also equipped girls with coping mechanisms for long-term resilience. Additional studies are needed to assess the long-term impacts of these interventions and to identify culturally relevant approaches for mental health stigma in fragile settings.



2. Addressing social norms and barriers that limit adolescent girls' access to education and opportunities

Harmful social norms, including early marriage and gender-based discrimination continue to limit adolescent girls' access to education and opportunities in climate- and conflict-affected regions. Early marriage, often driven by economic hardship or cultural practices, removes girls from school, significantly reducing their potential for personal and economic growth (Yotebieng, 2021).

Programmes that challenge these norms through community engagement and at the same time address financial barriers to education have been encouraging. For example, the Adolescent Girls Initiative-Kenya (AGI-K) delayed early marriage by combining conditional cash transfers for school expenses with community awareness campaigns. This dual approach not only kept girls in school but also facilitated parental and community support for girls' education (Austrian et al., 2021).

Fostering safe learning spaces where girls can access education without fear of harassment also has demonstrated success in retaining them in school (Kwauk et al., 2019). Interventions to address harmful social norms and barriers work most effectively when they extend beyond awareness campaigns. Programmes promoting education and prohibiting child marriage are most effective when paired with life skills training, inclusive curricula, and financial incentives to address root causes of early marriage and dropout rates.



3. Investing in integrated approaches that promote adolescent girls' financial, psychosocial, sexual reproductive, and educational well-being

In fragile contexts, adolescent girls face compounding risks that affect their financial, psychosocial, sexual reproductive, and educational well-being. Key informants and emerging evidence make clear that integrated multisectoral interventions are key to addressing the complex needs of adolescent girls in these settings. Systems-level interventions, such as community-based girls' clubs, provide a holistic approach by integrating vocational training, financial literacy and microcredit access (Bergstrom and Ozler, 2021). Financial literacy and economic empowerment are pivotal to promoting the long-term resilience and independence of adolescent girls.

Programmes like AGI-K have successfully integrated financial education with safe spaces, providing girls with practical financial tools, such as savings accounts and annual incentives (Austrian et al., 2020). The Girls

Improving Resilience through Livelihoods and Health (GIRL-H) programme, for example, provided girls with sexual reproductive health education and counselling, resulting in improved health outcomes and delayed sexual debut. GIRL-H also layered on entrepreneurship training with financial education, enabling participants to become financially independent through mentorship and business grants (Mercy Corps, 2024).

Studies that evaluate if and how integrated multisectoral interventions are contributing to impacts greater than the sum of single sector investments on adolescent girls' well-being remain an evidence gap (Austrian et al., 2020; Mercy Corps, 2024).



4. Leverage community structures, collaborate with local leaders and engage adolescent girls in the design, implementation, and evaluation of interventions

Key informants emphasised that the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions were closely tied to community and institutional support. Leveraging community structures, collaborating with local leaders and securing government backing are essential for ensuring the initial acceptance and long-term effectiveness of programmes.

Leveraging existing community structures, such as local organisations, cultural networks and informal support systems during intervention design, implementation and evaluation proved essential for embedding these interventions within the social fabric of the communities they aim to serve. Collaborating with local leaders – who are often trusted voices in the community – ensures that the programmes are culturally relevant and widely accepted, thereby increasing their effectiveness and reach.

Looking ahead

The desk review and key informant interviews provide a rich foundation of insights. But several gaps persist in the current evidence base to inform interventions that effectively and sustainably support the well-being of adolescent girls in climate- and conflict-vulnerable areas of East and West Africa.

The KIs as well as the desk review highlighted that few studies link specific interventions to measurable improvements in adolescent girls' resilience and well-being. There is also a limited understanding of how interventions can be modified to respond effectively to sudden shocks, such as displacement or climate-related disasters.

Recommendations

Building on these insights, we recommend the following for policy-makers, implementing partners and researchers:

For policy-makers

- Prioritise and invest in interventions that integrate health, financial and psychosocial support to address the holistic needs of adolescent girls.
- Invest in adolescent girls' mental health, particularly in conflict-affected regions. Programmes should integrate mental health support into existing financial and educational interventions to address the full spectrum of adolescent girls' needs.

For implementing partners

- Collaborate with local leaders and leverage existing community structures. Ensure that interventions are culturally relevant for the communities they aim to serve.

- Engage adolescents and youth in the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes to ensure that interventions are relevant and co-owned. This participatory approach fosters a sense of collective responsibility and enhances the sustainability of the initiatives.

For researchers

- Conduct longer-term studies to assess the sustained impact of interventions. These will help confirm if programmes contribute to lasting change rather than being temporary fixes.
- Better understand how programmes can be tailored to local contexts and norms. This research will help assess if and how context-specific adaptations contribute to more effective interventions.
- Explore how interventions can be modified to respond effectively to sudden shocks, such as displacement or climate-related disasters.



Nasra Abdi, a mentor from the Alliance Girl Group supported by GIRL-H, records savings data for her group in Masalani Sub-County, Garissa County, Kenya, during May 2024. © GIRL-H

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About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance, and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods, are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), donors, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments, and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

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