In Search of Safety and Solutions:
Somali Refugee Adolescent Girls at Sheder and Aw Barre Camps, Ethiopia

August 2012
Research. Rethink. Resolve.

The Women’s Refugee Commission identifies needs, researches solutions and advocates for global change to improve the lives of crisis-affected women and children. The Women’s Refugee Commission is legally part of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, but does not receive direct financial support from the IRC.

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Cover photo: Somali refugee girls do a mapping exercise, showing where they feel unsafe as they go about their daily tasks (see p. 6).

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Contents

Acronyms & Abbreviations........................................................................................................ i
Executive Summary ............................................................................................................. 1
  Key Findings ................................................................................................................ 1
  Key Recommendations ................................................................................................. 1
Purpose of the Mission........................................................................................................ 2
Methodology and Limitations .......................................................................................... 2
Country Snapshot: Ethiopia ........................................................................................... 3
  Ethiopia Refugee Policy and Institutional Framework ....................................................... 3
  Somali Refugees in Ethiopia ......................................................................................... 3
  Jijiga Area Refugee Camps ........................................................................................... 3
  Overview of Sheder and Aw Barre Camps ...................................................................... 4
Findings ................................................................................................................................ 5
What We Learned from Girls ............................................................................................ 5
  Girls' Physical Security ................................................................................................ 6
  Girls' Participation and Leadership .............................................................................. 7
  Barriers to Girls' Education and Study ......................................................................... 7
  Lack of Access to Safe and Dignified Work ................................................................... 8
  Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services ..................................................... 8
  Gender-based Violence Prevention and Response ........................................................ 9
  Access to Food and Non-food Items ............................................................................ 9
  Program Monitoring and Evaluation and Outreach to Excluded Girls .......................... 9
Next Steps .......................................................................................................................... 10
Notes ................................................................................................................................. 10
Acronyms & Abbreviations

ARRA  (Ethiopian government) Administration for Refugees and Returnee Affairs
GBV      Gender-based violence
NGO     Nongovernmental organization
UNHCR   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Executive Summary

The Women's Refugee Commission completed a research mission to the Jijiga Somali refugee camps in Ethiopia in April 2012. The research mission was the first of three such missions, which are part of a three-year global advocacy research project aimed at enhancing the safety and resilience of adolescent girls ages 10 to 16. The purpose of the three-week visit to Ethiopia was to assess Somali refugee adolescent girls’ protection and empowerment needs and priorities; learn what programs and community-based strategies appear to be serving them; appraise gaps in services from girls’ perspectives; and identify potential local partners that could implement an innovative pilot project focused on enhancing girls’ safety.

During the visit, the Women’s Refugee Commission first met with staff of government, UN and civil society agencies working with refugees in Addis Ababa and Jijiga (the regional capital of the Somali Region State) to learn about the operational context. We then traveled to the Sheder and Aw Barre refugee camps near Jijiga, where we conducted focus group discussions and individual interviews with 86 Somali refugee adolescent girls, 24 refugee adolescent boys and 25 refugee women and men community leaders. We listened to Somali refugee girls, boys, women and men to learn what measures will enable refugee adolescent girls to safely become resilient, self-reliant, healthy young women and leaders in their families and communities.

Key Findings

Adolescent girls in the Somali refugee camps in the Jijiga region are at extreme risk of sexual violence, exploitation and harmful traditional practices. Few programs actually reach them and address their asset-building needs, such as the development of protective social networks. As a result, most girls are isolated, marginalized and highly vulnerable.

Key Recommendations

Donors, ARRA, UN agencies, and international, national and community-based organizations must:

1. Increase girls’ physical security:
   - Provide substantial housing material with sturdy doors and secure locks for dwellings of unaccompanied, single girl-headed households.
   - Locate water points closer to girls’ housing and away from male-dominated areas, such as mosques and sports fields.

2. Support girls’ participation and leadership:
   - Encourage adolescent girls to meet other girls and adult women with higher status through mentorship initiatives.
   - Explore ways in which the Refugee Central Committees can consult adolescent girls in community decision-making processes, particularly those related to camp management, design and security.

3. Address barriers to girls’ education and study
   - Provide incentives to encourage girls’ enrollment in and completion of primary and secondary education.
   - Address high school drop-out rates through in-kind or material support to the girls or their families and for schools, and the provision of child care for young mothers.

4. Prepare girls for safe and dignified work:
   - Improve the safety of available livelihood strategies by, for example, creating terms and conditions for girls working as domestic help in and outside the refugee camps.
   - Provide adolescent girls with entrepreneurship and financial literacy training.

5. Improve SGBV prevention and response:
   - Train all security enforcement personnel and traditional justice bodies in gender-based violence prevention and response.
prevention and response, human rights and child protection, including the need to respect survivors’ confidentiality.

6. Improve program monitoring and evaluation and intentionally reach out to excluded girls:

• Program monitoring data must be disaggregated by sex and age in order for practitioners and donors to know whether programs actually reach adolescent girls.

Purpose of the Mission

The Women’s Refugee Commission traveled to the Somali Region State of Ethiopia in April 2012 as part of the “Protecting and Empowering Displaced Adolescent Girls” initiative, a three-year global advocacy research project being conducted in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania. The project seeks to increase refugee adolescent girls’ opportunities to build life, academic and livelihood skills and to identify models and approaches to keep them safe from all forms of harm, exploitation and abuse. The initiative works to achieve this by conducting fact-finding missions and partnering with local organizations and communities to test solutions voiced by refugee girls themselves to address their most pressing protection concerns and build their resiliency.

There is a growing awareness within the humanitarian community and refugee communities of the need to protect and empower refugee adolescent girls. This will require testing, monitoring and evaluating programs across all sectors that: 1) directly reach and serve diverse profiles of refugee adolescent girls; 2) engage influential men, boys, women and other girls to empower and protect refugee adolescent girls; and 3) improve the participation and inclusion of refugee adolescent girls.

To date, displaced adolescent girls have received little direct attention from humanitarian donors, policymakers and service providers. Donors and policymakers have not yet fully appreciated how targeted service outreach to adolescent girls can protect them from serious risks and long-term harm. The evidence base on effective programming with girls in situations of crisis and displacement has been scant. Service-providing agencies have been working with these populations indirectly, but often have not known whether they have reached adolescent girls. Adolescent girls have been aggregated into programs for children or adults, and yet their needs are distinct and unique. The period of adolescence is vital and sets the course for displaced girls’ healthy development and future potential.¹

Methodology and Limitations

The Ethiopian government Administration for Refugees and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) approved the Women’s Refugee Commission’s request for camp access and the right to speak with refugees in Jijiga area refugee camps. The camps selected for refugee interviews (with input and advice from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)) were Sheder and Aw Barre.

Findings and recommendations were synthesized from across primary and secondary data sources from desk and field research. Available secondary demographic and socioeconomic data on the local populations and on registered refugees in the Jijiga area was limited. Camp lists of implementing partners and descriptive statistics on the camp populations, refugee participation in camp management, sectoral indicators, refugee volunteers and social workers, and refugee incentive workers allowed the Women’s Refugee Commission to identify stakeholders and to construct a qualitative sample of demographic profiles of Somali refugees for field interviews.

The desk review was followed by a rapid field mission over a period of 18 days in Addis Ababa and Jijiga, and four days in the Sheder and Aw Barre camps to conduct interviews. The Women’s Refugee Commission carried out key informant interviews in Addis Ababa and Jijiga
with more than 40 staff of UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and government embassies, and in the Sheder and Aw Barre refugee camps with implementing agency staff and 25 female and male refugee community leaders. Also, in the Sheder and Aw Barre camps, the Women’s Refugee Commission interviewed 86 Somali refugee girls ages 10-16 through one-hour focus group discussions and in-depth individual interviews. Ten in-depth individual interviews were conducted with particularly “at risk” girls. In addition, focus group discussions were conducted with four groups of Somali refugee male adolescents.

Country Snapshot: Ethiopia

Ethiopia Refugee Policy and Institutional Framework

Ethiopia is party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. It is also party to regional instruments, such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problem in Africa. Ethiopia requires nearly all Eritrean, Sudanese and Somali refugees to live in camps near their respective borders, and requires them to obtain permits to leave. The government issues permits to camp residents for medical treatment, higher education or due to security threats, specifying the period of travel. The 2004 Ethiopian National Refugee Proclamation exercises Ethiopia’s reservation to the 1951 Convention’s right to work, placing the same restrictions on refugees as on other foreigners. In very rare cases, highly skilled refugees are granted work permits. There is no access for refugees to government-run schools; however, ARRA-managed primary schools are in the majority of camps. In 2010, the government adopted an “out-of-camp” policy allowing Eritrean refugees who can prove they are self-sufficient to live in urban areas.

Somali Refugees in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is located in the Horn of Africa, where political, social, economic and environmental challenges continue to drive massive displacement. As of May 25, 2012, there were 196,143 registered Somali refugees in Ethiopia. Hundreds of Somalis, mostly women and children, flee daily to Ethiopia to escape fighting between Transitional Federal Government Forces and Al-Shabaab, as well as to escape the recent drought and famine. Somali refugees have been present in Ethiopia since the late-1980s. Major influxes occurred in 1991, 1994, 2009 and 2010. The number of Somali refugee arrivals increased dramatically in 2011 due to the combined effects of drought, famine and insecurity in Somalia, with up to 600-700 people arriving on average per day, or 23,000 per month toward the end of the year.

Four regions of Ethiopia host Somali refugees in camps and urban areas: Jijiga (41,311), Dollo Ado (148,620), Addis Ababa (797) and Gode (1,354). Somali refugees in Ethiopia consist primarily of women and children at 90 percent; the majority of them are from Gedo (67.1%), Benadir (15.7%), Bay (8.3%) and Bakool and other surrounding areas (8.9%) of southern Mogadishu.

Jijiga Area Refugee Camps

An escalation of the political crisis in Somalia in 2007-2009 drove significant refugee influxes into the Jijiga region. The UNHCR and ARRA opened camps to accommodate new arrivals at Sheder and Aw Barre in the Jijiga area, and Bokolmanyo and Melkadida in the

Dollo Ado area. As of March 2012, the total number of registered Somali refugees in the Jijiga area was 41,074.\textsuperscript{11}

UNHCR seeks to ensure a fair and favorable protection environment for refugees, and to meet refugees’ basic needs through services that provide potable water; sufficient household fuel and basic domestic items, and sanitary materials for refugee women and girls; shelter and infrastructure; healthcare access; and education for children. A 2010 study found shortfalls in funding and implementation capacities in the Aw Barre and Sheder camps.\textsuperscript{12} At the time, there was inadequate service delivery in water and sanitation, health, education and provision of non-food assistance, such as household items and toiletries. New information is needed to assess the current adequacy of service delivery and the impact on diverse segments of the refugee population, including adolescent girls.

Overview of Sheder and Aw Barre Camps

In April 2012, UNHCR estimated the camp populations in Sheder at 11,497 and Aw Barre at 13,509.\textsuperscript{13} Refugees in these camps arrived mostly from urban areas in and around Mogadishu. Somali refugees from Mogadishu have relatively higher levels of education and more diverse work experience than those from rural backgrounds. There is a high degree of homogeneity in refugee and local Ethiopian Somali clan composition, including religion, language and culture, which helps the local communities accept and interact with refugees.\textsuperscript{14}

As of 2010, refugees in Sheder and Aw Barre officially had no access to land other than the small homestead plots (about 30 meters squared) they are given for erecting their shelter.\textsuperscript{15} Plots of this size could accommodate no more than a backyard or “kitchen” garden. Since then, however, some progress has been made to increase refugees’ access to land for cultivation and livelihood opportunities. The scarcity of water in the area has hampered even the smallest scale of cultivation opportunities in the past, but there are current efforts to overcome this limitation. UNHCR reported that additional land had been secured in 2011-2012 for pilot drip irrigation agricultural projects in Sheder and Aw Barre.\textsuperscript{16}

The majority of Somali refugees have no direct access to formal employment, apart from the few employed as incentive workers by camp-based implementing partners. Refugee women and men engage in petty trade, manual labor and other informal, insecure and low-paying work. Some refugee women run small “restaurants” and shops in the camps or offer laundry services. UNHCR and ARRA are currently looking for ways to
integrate refugee assistance with local economic development through improved infrastructure, expanding livelihood opportunities, market development and poverty reduction in the region. Partner agencies are implementing specific livelihood activities, such as poultry production, beekeeping, tailoring, vocational trainings and a micro-loan revolving fund targeting female-headed households or other vulnerable families to increase their income and support. It is not known, however, whether these livelihood programs were designed through a gender-analytical market assessment of labor and product markets in the camps and surrounding areas. It is also not known whom these livelihood programs are reaching, or what direct or indirect effects they may have on adolescent girls' empowerment and protection.

For the more than 11,000 refugee children of school age that UNHCR estimates reside in Sheder and Aw Barre camps, there are simply not enough school places for all to attend. In the Sheder camp, 50 percent of girls and 54 percent of boys are enrolled in primary school. In the Aw Barre camp, 33 percent of girls are enrolled, and 40 percent of boys. Rates drop substantially for secondary school for both boys (30-35%) and girls (14-15%). Most teachers are male (75-80%) due to low educational attainment among both refugee and local Ethiopian ethnic Somali women. In Sheder, there are only two female secondary school teachers, while 15 are male. To address this gender gap, UNHCR, in partnership with the UN Foundation's Girl Up Campaign, is supporting efforts to increase Somali girls' attendance and retention in school by providing school materials, solar lamps to study at night and scholarships to attend school. To make sure that the learning environments are safe and healthy, the UN is helping to build toilets and create access to water at the schools. Some 2,000 girls in the Somali camps benefitted from these efforts during the first year of implementation.

What We Learned From Girls

Girls lack opportunities and support in the camps to safely develop their social networks, participate in community activities, move about the camp freely and build social and economic assets to better meet their needs—as well as those of other children, disabled parents or elderly family members who often depend upon them. UNHCR identified 3,323 female children and adolescents in Sheder and Aw Barre as “at risk,” including 428 who had arrived in the camps unaccompanied or separated from their parents. They lack resources to meet their basic needs and experience and fear abuse. Girls identified specific profiles of girls who are disproportionately at risk and who have access to the least social and economic support. These profiles include adolescent girls and young women who are or have been unaccompanied or separated from their parents, as well as those who are or have been:

- out of school
- living alone
- living with a “foster family”
- young mothers
- disabled
- domestic workers
- trafficked into domestic and other labor
- trafficked into sex work

The recommendations below are aimed at donors, ARRA, UN agencies and international, national and community-based organizations. They must partner together within and across service sectors to address refugee girls' protection risks, promote and value their participation, raise their social status and increase program effectiveness in reaching and serving their unique needs.
Girls’ physical security

Focus group discussions incorporated a participatory safety mapping exercise in which participants in small groups of two to four drew on large sheets of paper with blue and red markers and told stories to present the drawings and their meanings. With the blue markers, participants depicted what they do in and where they go the course of their days. With red X’s, they indicated where they do not feel safe during the day and night, and explained what makes them feel unsafe and why. This “safe-scaping” participatory mapping method itself created a safe space within which adolescent girls or boys could discuss and reflect upon their protection risks, strategies to keep themselves safe and solutions for programs and community leaders to help improve their protection.

Girls said that insecure shelters and lack of lighting at night leave them feeling like “easy prey to anyone who wishes to do them harm.” Boys said they feel safe mostly everywhere and at all times of the day and night in the camps. By contrast, girls said they feel safe almost nowhere or at any time, especially at night. Girls said they fear and many have faced all forms of verbal, psychological, physical and sexual violence during the day and night. During the day, they fear harassment and attack by “hyenas, lions, snakes…and men,” particularly when collecting water and firewood. Girls consistently indicated in the safety mapping exercise that water points near mosques and on sports fields are concentrated sites of repeated harassment and abuse by men and boys who cluster in these areas. Girls said they try to walk in groups for greater safety, but that they cannot always do so.

Recommendations to increase girls’ physical security:

- Provide substantial housing material with sturdy doors and secure locks for dwellings of unaccompanied, single girl-headed households.
- Provide adequate camp lighting, including solar lanterns, to refugee women and girls.
- Install single-dwelling latrines within the compounds of single female households.
- Locate water points closer to girls’ housing and away from male-dominated areas such as mosques and sports fields.
- Increase security through community watch groups with more female security guards.
- Sensitize male security guards on dealing with child/girl protection issues and the need for confidentiality in reporting incidents.

Girls’ participation and leadership

Social norms dictate what adolescent girls can or cannot do. This often hinders their access to services and their ability to advocate for themselves. Girls who are more socially isolated by heavy domestic work, care giving, untreated trauma or social stigma often do not have a single peer with whom they can carry out chores or move around the camp to increase their feeling of security. Limitations in program outreach and service...
delivery, combined with discriminatory social norms, have meant that Somali girls in Sheder and Aw Barre camps continue to face interruptions to their schooling, early pregnancy, early marriage, inadequate physical and legal protection, and underpaid, exploitative and abusive work.

Somali refugee adolescent girls’ contributions to community life and leadership activities in the camp have not been recognized, valued or supported in their communities. Girls with higher social status, such as those with greater family support or those who attend secondary school, are testing social norms that constrict what is socially acceptable for Somali girls to be and do. A small group of these girls are playing soccer and volleyball on playing fields dominated by boys. Others are advocating successfully with their parents not to “marry them off” early, but instead to prioritize and allow them to complete their secondary education. In advocating for greater participation in public life, these girls can set precedents and open the way for other girls in the camps to follow their examples.

**Recommendations to support girls’ participation and leadership:**

- Engage men and boys as agents in reducing violent attitudes and behavior towards women and girls by focusing on the positive, protective roles men can and do play in the lives of their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters.

- Engage men and women community leaders in discussions on girls’ rights, harmful social norms and harmful traditional practices.

- Provide girls with safe spaces and “girls only” times where they can socialize, learn new skills and support each other.

- Encourage adolescent girls to meet other girls and adult women with greater status through mentorship initiatives.

- Support girls’ own initiatives in playing sports, starting up girls’ clubs and encouraging each other to attend school.

- Explore ways in which the Refugee Central Committees can consult adolescent girls in community decision-making processes, particularly those related to camp management, design and security.

**Barriers to girls’ education and study**

The vast majority of adolescent girls in Sheder and Aw Barre camps have been out of school for several years since fleeing Somalia in 2008-2009 and lack the social support and resources needed to return to their education. Of the girls who did manage to return to school, many dropped out because of heavy domestic chore burdens, early pregnancy and early marriage. Girls who are out of school and caring for others consistently reported poorer health and lower social and economic status than their in-school peers.

**Recommendations to address barriers to girls’ education and study:**

- Provide incentives to encourage girls’ enrollment in and completion of primary and secondary education and address high school drop-out rates through in-kind or material support to the girls or their families, and for schools and the provision of child care for young mothers.

- Strengthen and expand the UNHCR/UN Foundation Girl Up campaign efforts to increase girls’ attendance and retention through the provision of school materials, solar lamps and separate toilet facilities.

- Identify appropriate alternative and nonformal education opportunities for adolescent girls and encourage life and livelihoods skills building through formal mentorships with older women.
Most girls do not have the opportunity to go to school. Girls who attend secondary school are testing social norms that constrict what is socially acceptable for Somali girls to be and do. The humanitarian community should provide incentives to encourage girls’ enrollment in and completion of primary and secondary education.

Lack of access to safe and dignified work

Girls reported a lack of access to decent work opportunities. The girls the Women’s Refugee Commission interviewed could only identify domestic work and the sex trade as pathways to income. Adult women in the camps engage in petty trade and some run small businesses in the camps, particularly as food service vendors. Girls and key informants said that labor and sex trafficking is prevalent in the local villages, towns and destination countries abroad, such as Djibouti and Saudi Arabia. Key informants characterized the rate of trafficking as “horrific,” adding that the “Gulf states recruit heavily.”

Recommendations to prepare girls for safe and dignified work:

• Improve the safety of available livelihood strategies by, for example, creating terms and conditions for girls working as domestic help in and outside the refugee camps.

• Encourage the Refugee Central Committee to meet at least once with each of the families hiring domestic workers as a minimum deterrent for abuse at work.

• Conduct an assessment of appropriate training opportunities available locally that lead to work.

• Identify vocational trainings that allow girls to participate in new activities that do not carry social stigma.

• Provide adolescent girls with entrepreneurship and financial literacy training.

• Provide child care for girls participating in work and training activities.

Access to sexual and reproductive health services

Girls reported that they do not access sexual and reproductive health services due to fear of discrimination from adult providers and social stigma. Key informants and girls themselves said that many girls trade sex to meet basic needs for food, income, clothes, medications and transportation. Girls identified pregnancy from sexual exploitation and rape as central to many of their peers’ poor education, health and economic outcomes. Pregnancy also contributed significantly to the social marginalization of unmarried young mothers.

Recommendations to increase girls’ access to sexual and reproductive health services:

• Ensure that sexual and reproductive health services are accessible to adolescent girls and develop strategies to address social stigma and discrimination.

• Train young women as peer sexual and reproductive health workers.
• Provide adolescent girls with individual and confidential services in a safe space, including access to contraception.

**Gender-based violence prevention and response**

Girls of all ages have experienced and are at risk of sexual harassment, verbal and psychological abuse, female genital mutilation, rape, abduction, early and forced marriage, early pregnancy, exploitative domestic work, labor trafficking, and sex trafficking. Girls who are not in school reported higher rates of violence and harm. Many girls said they feel “demoralized” after surviving one or more forms of violence. Many said they find it “difficult to think beyond their next meal.” We learned from girls that effective prevention and response to all forms of gender-based violence (GBV) will require developing the capacities of all those involved in service provision and oversight, including community members. Girls believe that existing justice mechanisms were not currently equipped to protect survivors who report GBV. UNHCR has undertaken advocacy for legal protection, pursuing formal justice, as well as providing support and advice to traditional courts. Unfortunately, lack of capacity, structure, and confidentiality at many stages of the judicial process mean the system has often offered inadequate or no protection for young women and girls who chose to seek legal redress.

**Recommendations to improve GBV prevention and response:**

• Continue to raise awareness of GBV through in-camp education campaigns, trainings and sensitization.

• Train all security enforcement personnel and traditional justice bodies in GBV prevention and response, human rights and child protection, including respect for survivors’ confidentiality.

**Access to food and non-food items**

Safety concerns and fear of social stigma restrict adolescent girls’ access to opportunities in the camps to develop “protective social and economic assets.” Examples of a protective asset include a social network that could allow girls to seek support from each other and other members of their community. An economic asset would allow girls to have some financial independence to buy what they need, which is especially relevant for girls who are heads of household. Girls reported not registering their newborn children for fear of social stigma, and as a consequence forfeiting their entitlement to supplementary food rations provided to mothers and babies. Some girls reported that pregnant girls often gave birth in a nearby town and returned to the camp telling community members that their baby belonged to an “aunty” or other extended family member in the town. Many young mothers were rumored to be sharing their food allocations with their babies.

**Recommendations to increase girls’ access to food and non-food items:**

• Register all children born to refugee adolescent girl mothers and ensure that they receive allocated food and non-food rations for their children.

• Carry out registration spot checks to ensure that adolescent girls with children are receiving their allocated food and non-food rations.

**Program monitoring and evaluation and outreach to excluded girls**

Actors on the ground recognize that the needs of adolescent girls are not being fully met. Good program approaches dictate that robust monitoring and evaluation systems and data be in place in order to capture information that can lead to programs being improved.

**Recommendations to improve program monitoring and evaluation and reach out to excluded girls:**

• Program monitoring data must be disaggregated
by sex and age in order for practitioners and donors to know whether or not programs actually reach adolescent girls, including the most marginalized segments of the girl population.

- Programs must be able to report not only numbers and profiles of adolescent girls served, but also which profiles of girls their programs do not currently reach and serve in order to develop strategies to reach them.
- Participatory program monitoring approaches should be used to assess from girls’ own perspectives the relevance and effectiveness of programs of all sectors in meeting their unique needs.

**Next Steps**

The WRC plans to fund an 18-month pilot project with a local NGO in the Jijiga area camps to test approaches and methodologies to best reach adolescent girls. The learning from these pilots (also to be undertaken in Uganda and Tanzania) will lead to models on how to program for adolescent girls in emergencies. A guidance document on the learning from the pilots will be released in 2014 aimed at practitioners who work with adolescent girls in emergencies so they can better support this vulnerable and often marginalized group.

**Notes**


2. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter and context, all identities are withheld (of key informants and implementing agencies we spoke to).


8. Source: UNHCR.


15. Ibid


17. UNHCR estimates that 44% of Jijiga area camp populations are between the ages of 5 and 17, UNHCR, Sub-office Jijiga Popula-
11

PoLIFQ, last accessed August 10, 2012.

com/doc/74685825/Education-Fact-Sheets-3, last accessed Au-
gust 9, 2012.

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egory=3, last accessed August 9, 2012.

22 Focus group discussion with out-of-school Somali refugee girls 
ages 14-16, Aw barre refugee camp, April 20, 2012.

23 Focus group discussion with out-of-school Somali refugee girls 
ages 14-16, Aw barre refugee camp, April 20, 2012.

24 Interview with agency staff, Addis Ababa, April 2012.

25 Focus group discussions with out-of-school Somali refugee girls 
ages 14-16 in Sheder and Aw Barre camps, April 16-20, 2012.