

Can refugee girls access family planning services?

18% of 12-19 year old Sudanese refugee girls in Chad currently use a modern contraceptive

Background

Chad hosted 400,000 Sudanese refugees from 2003, increasing to 1.3 million 2023–2025. IRC's Protection, Gender and Health (ProGeSan) program aims to improve women's empowerment through better access to SRH and GBV services in 4 refugee camps in Wadi Fira. Adolescents' SRH needs remain largely unmet globally, and information on SRH knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors among refugee adolescents is sparse. This study explored refugee adolescent SRH, including adolescent contraceptive use and parental and provider perspectives.

Methods

This study was conducted in July 2022 in 2 refugee camps (Milé and Kounoungou) :

- participatory research activities with 4 groups of refugee girls
- representative survey of 12-19 year old refugee girls (n=664)
- 4 focus groups with parents of adolescents
- interviews with midwives, TBAs and CHWs

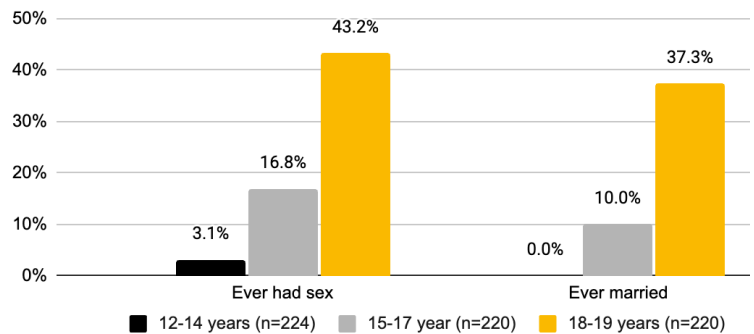
Contraceptive use was only measured among sexually active adolescents.

Key Findings

Early marriage was rare

- 88% lived in the camp for 10+ years
- 90% currently in school
- 57% of 12-17 year olds reported boyfriend as first sexual partner; 79% of 18-19 year olds reported husband
- Most girls described marriage before age 18 as 'forced' and interrupted education

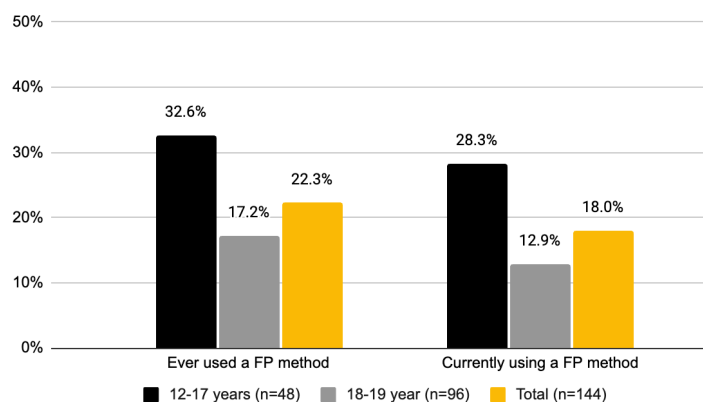
Figure 1. Sexual activity & marriage, Girls 12-19 (n=664)



“Girls are usually given in marriage, and more often than not it's their husbands who forbid them from continuing their studies.”
(15-19 year old)

Despite stigma, some girls currently use a modern contraceptive.

Figure 2. Modern contraceptive use, Girls 12-19 (n=139)

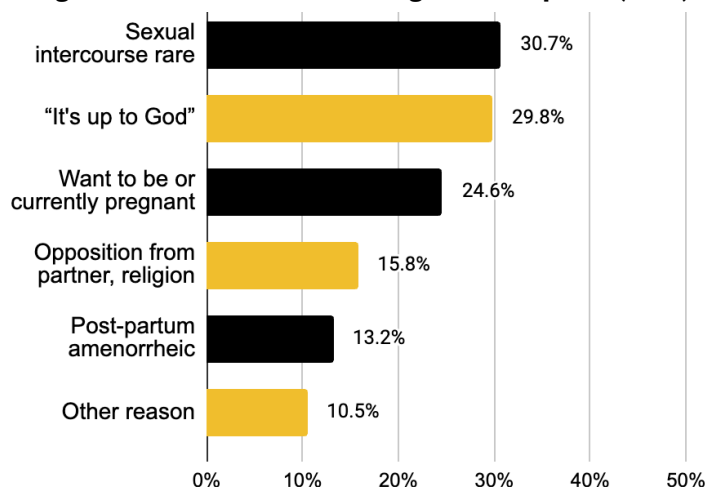


- 56% of current contraceptive users unmarried
- 88% used injectables, 12% used pills. No LARCs
- 71% obtained method in health center
- 62% of all girls believed the midwife would keep their contraceptive visit secret.
- Midwives and some CHWs helped girls obtain contraception in secret

“Sometimes adolescents come to our house and explain their problem. And when we go to the health center, we explain it to the midwife, then we bring her the method, and she comes to get it from us at home, not in the health center.” (CHW)

**“Women and girls die during childbirth, and this is a loss... That’s why we agree that adolescents may get family planning.”
(Mother of adolescent)**

Figure 3. Reasons for Not Using Contraception (n=114)



Abortion was stigmatized but not rare.

- Most groups put premarital unwanted pregnancy and abortion on a timeline.
- Girls described keeping a premarital pregnancy secret from parents, and in most cases, seeking an abortion to avoid stigma
- 39% reported knowing someone in the camp who had ended a pregnancy

**“If the pregnancy is not from your husband, you take abortion pills.”
(12-14 year old)**

- Parents and health workers described stigma toward premarital sex and unintended pregnancy, especially among men, impedes adolescent access to SRH services
- Although fathers and most mothers were against premarital contraceptive use, some mothers expressed more nuanced opinions

Recommendations

- Increase education and information on LARCs with adolescents
- Make services more adolescent responsive to improve access
- Expand service delivery models, including community-based distribution, DMPA-SC, to improve girls’ access
- Engage parents and community members on adolescent SRHR to combat stigma
- It is critical to engage adolescent girls, married and unmarried, so their perspectives and voices are central to these efforts.

Conclusion

Despite stigma towards premarital sex, some refugee girls—unmarried and married—obtained contraceptive services, demonstrating both their interest in and need for contraception.

Study Team

This study was conducted through a partnership among International Rescue Committee, the University of N'Djamena, and the Reproductive Health Access, Information and Services in Emergencies (RAISE) Initiative, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, and funded by the French Development Agency.

Sexual and reproductive health of Sudanese refugee girls in Chad: mixed methods study with perspectives from 12-19 year old girls, parents, and health workers. BMC Public Health 2024.

