



PROTECT

OUR

EDUCATION

Making Schools in Conflict
Safer for Girls



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When we arrived in the camp, my friends and I were very happy to go to school every day. But we started being afraid to go because some armed people used to come and attack our school and take some girls away. Now we are not regularly in school.

SARATA, 14, INTERNALLY DISPLACED GIRL IN BURKINA FASO¹

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KEY MESSAGES

- In conflict settings around the world, attacks on education and military use of schools are profoundly undermining children’s right to education. Children are often denied their right to education for several years and live with life-long trauma. Generations of young people are being failed.
- Between 2015 and 2019, **22,000 students, teachers, and education personnel** were deliberately targeted and harmed. In **21 countries**, girls and women were directly targeted in attacks on education because of their gender.² Girls’ education may be a specific target, and girls and women are disproportionately affected by sexual violence in and around schools.
- For adolescent girls in particular, the impacts of attacks on education can be devastating and compound the barriers they already face in accessing education. Attacks often exacerbate pre-existing gender discrimination and harmful practices such as child marriage and early pregnancy, which have lifelong consequences. Girls living in conflict and crisis affected contexts are nearly **90 percent** more likely to be out of secondary school than their counterparts in countries not affected by conflict.³
- All governments should endorse, implement, and support the Safe Schools Declaration, and allocate adequate resources to keeping schools safe. Plan International is calling for the particular needs and experiences of girls and women to be explicitly acknowledged and addressed when developing measures to prevent and respond to attacks on education.
- The International Community, including the UN Security Council, and Governments should demand and pursue accountability for all those who target and attack schools, kill and maim students and teachers, and abduct girls, ensuring all parties to conflict fulfil their obligations under international law.

1 Quote from Plan International. 2020. *Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Voices from the Sahel*

2 GCPEA. 2020. *Education Under Attack 2020*

3 UNESCO. 2015. *Humanitarian aid for education: why it matters and why more is needed*



INTRODUCTION

The right to education is not suspended during armed conflict and crisis.⁴ Education can provide physical and emotional protection, which can be both life-sustaining and life-saving⁵ and can offer children stability and hope for the future during a time of upheaval.

And yet the reality for too many children and young people growing up in countries facing conflict and insecurity is that education is often one of the first human rights impacted. Their schools may be damaged, destroyed, or occupied by military forces and armed groups; students and their teachers may be attacked or abducted and children in school targeted for recruitment into armed groups. When education comes under attack and schools stop being places of safety, children are often denied their right to education for several years and live with lifelong trauma. Generations of young people are being failed and left further behind.

While the effects of attacks on education are felt by all students and teachers affected, in many contexts the experiences of girls and women are distinct – the kinds of abuses

committed against them are often different, and the long-term consequences of attacks are often different from those faced by boys and men. For adolescent girls in particular, the longer-term impacts of attacks can be particularly devastating. Girls living in conflict and crisis affected contexts are nearly 90 percent more likely to be out of secondary school than their counterparts in countries not affected by conflict.⁶

The Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) is an inter-governmental political commitment by states to better protect schools and universities, their students and staff, during armed conflict. While an increasing number of states have endorsed the SSD, more needs to be done. It is critical that all governments endorse and fully implement the SSD and allocate adequate resources to keeping schools safe. **Plan International is calling for particular attention to be given to the experiences of girls and women affected by attacks on education, and for implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration to be gender responsive.**

4 Education, including schools, is protected under International Humanitarian Law, and International Human Rights Law and Agenda 2030 apply to everyone in all contexts.

5 [Central Emergency Response Fund Lifesaving Criteria](#)

6 UNESCO. 2015. [Humanitarian aid for education: why it matters and why more is needed](#)

ATTACKS ON EDUCATION: THE CURRENT GLOBAL PICTURE

Between 2015 and 2019, The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) documented over 11,000 attacks on education or military use of education institutions globally, and 22,000 students, teachers, and education personnel deliberately targeted and harmed.⁷

In some regions, COVID-19, and measures to limit the spread of the virus are further

exacerbating violence and insecurity. In the Central Sahel region of West Africa (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger), a sharp increase in attacks by Non-State Armed Groups has been recorded, as the current school closures and insecurity related to COVID-19, have been exploited, in the words of the UN Secretary General, as ‘a window of opportunity to strike’.⁸

TARGETING OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

Between 2015 and 2019, girls and women were directly targeted in attacks because of their gender in 21 countries.⁹ In some contexts, armed groups threaten teachers, students, and families against educating girls in an effort to suppress girls’ education.¹⁰ In contexts including Nigeria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, girls’ schools have been directly attacked, in part due to ideological or religious opposition to girls’ education.¹¹

Attacks on girls and women often take the form of sexual violence. Armed actors commit sexual violence in and on routes to school, and in some contexts target girls and female teachers for abductions. The recruitment or abduction of female students and teachers can be used to “reward” combatants, such as by providing them with “wives”, or to play other roles in supporting military operations.¹² Recent evidence from Plan International and UNICEF sheds new light on the often-overlooked experiences and needs of girls abducted by armed forces and armed groups, demonstrating that, contrary to stereotypes,

their experiences are wide-ranging and can also include roles as active combatants.¹³

These gendered attacks have devastating impacts on girls’ physical and mental health and wellbeing, affect girls’ ability to pursue their education and may also impede their ability to move on with their lives.¹⁴ Violence against abducted girls can also have intergenerational impacts; for instance, between January and August 2020, the GBV Sub Cluster in Mali reported nearly 100 children born as a result of rape.¹⁵

Girls who have experienced sexual violence, or who return to their communities after escaping capture, often with children of their own, face stigma and exclusion, including by their peers. Such girls and their children are amongst the most vulnerable, often ending up as female-headed households lacking viable livelihoods and unable or unwilling to access gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services.

7 GCPEA. 2020. [Education Under Attack 2020](#)

8 [COVID-19 threatening global peace and security, UN chief warns](#) | UN News

9 GCPEA. 2020. [Education Under Attack 2020](#)

10 *ibid*

11 GCPEA 2019, ‘[Its Very painful to talk about: Impacts of attacks on education on women and girls](#)’

12 *ibid*

13 Plan International and UNICEF. 2020. [Girls Associated With Armed Forces and Armed Groups: lessons learnt and good practices on prevention of recruitment and use, release and reintegration.](#)

14 GCPEA 2019, ‘[Its Very painful to talk about: Impacts of attacks on education on women and girls](#)’

15 [GBV Information Management System - Secondary Data Form from GBV actors in Mali](#)

WIDER GENDERED IMPACTS OF ATTACKS



Even when girls are not directly targeted because of their gender and age, **attacks can serve to compound the barriers they already face in accessing education** and can exacerbate pre-existing gender discrimination and harmful practices. Girls who face intersecting vulnerabilities based on social characteristics such as disability or migrant or refugee status often face additional challenges.

Girls interviewed by GCPEA in Nigeria reported that they had been forced to suspend their education after their school was attacked, or permanently dropped out of school because of the attacks.¹⁶ Families' and girls' own fears of returning to school combine with other barriers to increase gendered gaps in schooling. Girls in the Central Sahel have told us that the burden of household chores, the costs associated with school, concerns about security on the way to school and child marriage and early and unwanted pregnancies all impinge on their access to education and ability to stay in school.¹⁷ The result of these barriers is that girls are less likely than boys to transition to and remain in secondary school. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic it was projected that by 2030 only 1 in 3 girls in crisis-affected countries will have completed secondary school.¹⁸ COVID-19 has further reduced girls' opportunities to continue their studies, with an

estimated 10 million girls likely to permanently drop out of school because of the pandemic.¹⁹

When girls drop out of school, even for short periods, their risk of child marriage increases.²⁰ School attacks, closures and insecurity combine with other drivers of child marriage in conflict and crisis settings - as a result, the ten countries with the highest child marriage rates are considered fragile or extremely fragile.²¹ The impacts of COVID-19 are further exacerbating risks of marriage for girls; UNICEF has warned that ten million additional child marriages may occur before the end of the decade as a result of the pandemic.²²

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is in turn a powerful driver of adolescent pregnancy and maternal mortality. Girls are often socially isolated and under pressure to prove their fertility soon after marriage. Many married girls have no access to contraception and little power in the relationship, with the result that they bear children before their immature bodies are ready, risking severe health problems and even death.

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If there is money we further their education but if there is none then we marry them out after their secondary school.

**COMMUNITY LEADER,
KALERI, NIGERIA²³**

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16 GCPEA 2018. "I Will Never Go Back to School": The Impact of Attacks on Education for Nigerian Women and Girls

17 Plan International. 2020. *Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Voices from the Sahel*

18 Plan International UK. 2019. *Left out and left behind: adolescent girls' secondary education in crises*

19 Malala Fund 2020 *Girl's Education and COVID 19*

20 GCPEA 2019, 'Its Very painful to talk about: Impacts of attacks on education on women and girls'

21 Girls Not Brides. 2020. *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings*

22 UNICEF. 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/10-million-additional-girls-risk-child-marriage-due-covid-19>

23 Plan International, 2018, *Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Voices from the Lake Chad Basin*

CEFM also undermines the fulfilment of a host of other human rights, including girls' right to education. In a Plan International needs assessment in Northeast Nigeria, respondents in 60 percent of sites surveyed reported that married girls are unable to participate in any activities outside the home, including continuing their education, without approval from their husbands.²⁴ Policies which prevent pregnant girls and adolescent mothers attending school, or which fail to facilitate their re-entry to education further compounds their situation.²⁵ Adolescent girls are clear that child early and forced marriage is a threat to their current well-being and future prospects. They feel scared and anxious about marriage.²⁶



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“Most of us [used to] finish school. Now we face serious challenges to go to school because of the war. Most girls now drop out because of unwanted pregnancy, poverty of the parents, insecurity of sexual abuse and outbreak of attacks from armed groups.”

**ADOLESCENT GIRL IN NORTH WEST
– SOUTH WEST CAMEROON²⁷**

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Concerns about safety and security in and on the way to schools, and in community settings also mean that **girls and young women face heightened constraints on their social**

roles and their mobility. Plan International research has found that in contexts including the Lake Chad region and the Central Sahel, families are placing tighter restrictions on girls, while girls themselves report changing their behaviour and limiting their movement in public spaces in response to harassment and abuse.²⁸ These constraints restrict girls' ability to access essential services, but also undermine their basic human rights, including their right to education.

Dropping out of school critically **undermines girls' and young women's future prospects for employment and economic independence.** For conflict affected societies, a generation of young women and men denied their right to education are being left ill equipped to take advantage of opportunities, advance peace and security and challenge gender inequality and discrimination.

Yet even amidst these challenges and in spite of their fear, girls repeatedly stress their wish and determination to continue their education, along with their deep desire for peace and an end to conflict and insecurity.²⁹

24 Plan International. 2017. [Needs Assessment from Borno and Adamawa States](#)

25 Human Rights Watch. 2018. [Leave no girl behind in Africa: discrimination in education against pregnant girls and adolescent mothers](#)

26 Plan International, 2018, [Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Voices from the Lake Chad Basin](#)

27 Plan International. 2021. [Listen to Us: Adolescent Girls in North West-South West Cameroon on Conflict and COVID-19](#)

28 Plan International, 2018, [Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Voices from the Lake Chad Basin](#)

29 Plan International. 2021. [Listen to Us: Adolescent Girls in North West-South West Cameroon on Conflict and COVID-19](#)

THE SAFE SCHOOLS DECLARATION

The [Safe Schools Declaration](#) (SSD) is an inter-governmental political commitment by states to better protect schools and universities, their students and staff, during armed conflict. Since it was opened for endorsement in 2015, the Safe Schools Declaration has been endorsed by [111 states](#).³⁰ While this is a majority of UN member states this needs to go further – all states should endorse the SSD.

While endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration is an important first step, it is critical that it is implemented in full at national and local levels, and that measures put in place to keep schools safe are adequately resourced. Governments that endorse the Declaration commit to strengthen monitoring and reporting of attacks on education; investigate alleged violations of international law relating to education and provide assistance to victims; and support conflict sensitive education and the continuation of education during armed conflict. Endorsing states agree to use the [Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict](#), a non-binding practical tool to deter military use of schools and universities.

There has been significant progress made in implementing the SSD commitments amongst many endorsing countries.³¹ In several of the countries where Plan International works

to support the implementation of the SSD, primarily in West and Central Africa, Safe Schools Committees, Working Groups or Task teams have been established and national and subnational levels. These groups, which involve membership from both government and civil society, play a strategic role in advocacy, training and implementation in affected communities. This is an effective model for taking forward SSD implementation involving multi-stakeholder engagement. In Mali, for example, the SSD committee was instrumental in the launch of a process to develop a draft law aimed at protecting schools and universities, while in Cameroon, the SSD taskforce has developed a roadmap for implementation of the SSD in the country.

However, to date there has been insufficient attention paid to gender considerations in efforts to implement the SSD. Given the particular impacts of attacks on education on girls and women, it is critical that implementation of the SSD at national and local levels applies a gender responsive approach. This includes a specific focus on understanding and addressing the experiences and needs of girls and women who are at risk of or who have experienced attacks; ensuring that girls and women are able to participate in planning and implementation of the SSD, and implementing targeted efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence.

30 [States that have endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration - regjeringen.no](#)

31 [GCPEA. 2019. Practical Impact of the Safe Schools Declaration: fact sheet](#)

PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S WORK TO SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SSD IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

Plan International's education response for crisis affected countries is centred on supporting crisis-affected school age children and youth, particularly girls, to access and complete inclusive, safe, equitable and quality formal, non-formal and informal education. Plan International adopts a gender-responsive approach that considers the specific needs of girls and boys and addresses the barriers to education for vulnerable groups, in particular for girls and children with disabilities. We achieve this through implementing measures and actions that promote and support safe, protective and non-violent learning environments.

Since 2016, Plan International has been supporting the promotion of the Safe Schools Declaration across West and Central Africa.³² With the widespread endorsement by countries in the region over the last five years, our focus has shifted to supporting implementation of the SSD guidelines at national level.³³ Under our regional project, supported by the Norwegian Government, Plan International is supporting the establishment and strengthening of Safe Schools Declaration Working Groups and their collaboration with the Education Clusters.

We are advocating for the expansion of SSD Working Groups to include women's and children/youth umbrella organisations. This is important in order to ensure that the voices and aspirations of women, children and youth are heard in advocacy, and that they are able to contribute to the search for local solutions to the problem of school closures, the strengthening of local mechanisms for building social cohesion, and the development of school protection

plans. Recognising the importance of military forces understanding SSD commitments, we have also encouraged the participation of high-ranking military commanders in SSD Online Trainings.

At the regional and global levels, we facilitate partnerships between the Regional Education in Emergencies Working Group and the Safe Schools Declaration Working Groups on the one hand, and with the [Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack](#) (GCPEA) on the other hand. In addition to being members of the GCPEA steering committee, Plan International is a member of the [Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict](#) (CAAC) coalition and conducts advocacy with the UN Security Council and other key UN Member States and stakeholders on attacks against education, a grave violation of children's rights in conflict. At the AU level, Plan International is a member of the CAAC steering group and has been supporting continental efforts to advocate for safe school environments in countries where children have been caught up in conflict situations.

In West and Central Africa, Plan International is working as part of the [Joining Forces alliance](#),³⁴ in partnership with UNICEF, on a joint digital advocacy campaign targeting governments of the Sahel and Lake Chad regions. The campaign is calling for the effective implementation and tracking of progress of the Safe School Declaration guidelines, amongst other actions, to ensure the protection of children and teachers on their way to and from school, and while they are there.

32 Countries covered: Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, CAR, Guinea, Senegal

33 Two of the countries covered through this project have not yet endorsed the SSD, namely Guinea and Senegal. We are continuing to advocate for SSD endorsement in these countries.

34 Joining Forces is an **alliance of the six largest international child rights organisations**. Its members are: Child-Fund Alliance, Plan International, Save the Children International, SOS-Children's Villages International, Terre des Hommes International Federation and World Vision International

PLAN INTERNATIONAL IS CALLING FOR:

- All governments to **endorse, implement, and support** the Safe Schools Declaration, including by allocating adequate resources to implementation. The particular needs of girls and women should be explicitly acknowledged and considered when developing measures to prevent and respond to attacks on education.
- All parties to armed conflict to **immediately cease unlawful attacks on schools and universities**, and along routes to school. This includes ceasing specific abuses against female students, teachers and other education personnel.
- All parties to armed conflict to immediately **end all recruitment and use of children, including girls** for any reason and take all steps necessary to **prevent sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) by combatants**, including by halting all forced and child marriages, and holding combatants accountable, in accordance with international standards.
- All armed forces and armed groups to **stop using schools and universities for military purposes** and incorporate the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict into military doctrine, operational frameworks, codes of conduct, and training. This includes training national defence and security forces on the prohibition of sexual violence.
- Governments to **systematically investigate attacks on education and fairly prosecute those responsible**, in accordance with applicable national and international law. This includes investigating and prosecuting alleged perpetrators of sexual violence committed against students and teachers in the context of such attacks.
- Governments, with the support of international actors, to **strengthen monitoring and reporting of attacks on education** and relating to school security, including incidents of sexual violence and specific threats to female students and teachers. Data must be disaggregated by type of attack on education, sex, age, location, person or group responsible, number of days the institution was closed, and type of institution (e.g. all-girl, all-boy, mixed school) affected. Data collected must be analysed and utilised in order to improve efforts to prevent and respond to attacks on education.
- Governments to **ensure and maintain access to safe and quality education during armed conflict**. This includes working with school communities and all other relevant stakeholders to develop strategies to reduce the risk of attacks and comprehensive safety and security plans in the event of attacks. Participatory, gender responsive approaches should be employed which incorporate the inputs of girls in all their diversity in risk mapping, planning, and the creation of early warning systems.
- Develop **targeted reintegration interventions** for girls and women who have experienced sexual violence, abductions, or recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups, as well as their children born of wartime rape. This requires comprehensive strategies, of adequate duration and backed by sufficient funding, which include measures to increase the availability of and access to services for the physical and psychological treatment of sexual violence.
- Invest in and ensure that contextual and responsive **alternative and distance learning programmes** are made available to all students out of school due to armed conflict, including refugee and internally displaced children. These should build on examples of good practice during the COVID-19 pandemic, including low-tech solutions, such as use of radio, TV and SMS and should continue after the pandemic. Schools occupied by armed forces and armed groups during the pandemic should be vacated and repaired, and risk assessments conducted before students return to these schools to ensure their safety.
- Governments, with the support of international actors, should provide **non-discriminatory assistance for all survivors of attacks on education**, regardless of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, or other attributes, while taking into account their distinct needs and experiences based on gender and potential vulnerabilities such as disability and forced displacement. This includes provision of medical and psychosocial assistance and support for the expansion of specialized outreach to female survivors of attacks on education

About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected.

As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

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