

THE WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA BRIEF



2020:

**Gender
matters**



Save the Children

CHILD'S FOREWORD

Children have nothing to do with the causes of armed conflicts, yet we are the ones most affected by it – exposed to hunger and disease, displaced, tortured, killed, sexually abused, deprived of education, trafficked, separated from parents, recruited as child soldiers. When will children's suffering end?

World leaders must focus on upholding children's rights in conflict. We want a world where children like me enjoy the right to life, free expression, education, health care and other basic rights and social services. A world where we have the opportunity to grow up, fulfil our dreams, help our siblings, parents and community, and positively influence the future of our country. Countries cannot harvest what they didn't sow. The better the rights of children are protected today, the more peaceful and liveable our communities will be in the future. When children know their rights, they can speak for themselves and others – and cannot be intimidated. We can ask questions and demand a response.

Leaders should understand that if we are not heard today, we cannot speak tomorrow.

PURITY, GIRLS' RIGHTS ADVOCATE, AGE 14, NIGERIA

Save the children's Girl champion Purity speaking at the Pan-african conference on children and armed conflict (caac) co-organized by Save the Children and the African Child Policy Forum. The conference was held in addis ababa from the 15 - 17 october 2019.

Purity is a passionate child rights advocate, a gifted public speaker, and a bright student with big dreams to advance the rights of Nigerian girls.

INTRODUCTION



Since 1990, the number of children living in conflict zones around the world has almost doubled, reaching 415 million in 2018.

Across Africa, 170 million children live in conflict zones – which is equivalent to one in every four children. Successive generations of children across the continent have grown up knowing nothing other than conflict, including in the three West and Central Africa countries who are included in the list of the top ten worst conflict-affected countries to be a child – DRC, Mali, and Nigeria.¹

² The assessment of the ten worst conflict-affected countries for children was based on: the prevalence of the six grave violations against children in conflict (see Appendix 1); the conflict intensity (measured by the number of recorded casualties); total child population living in conflict zones; and the proportion of children living in conflict zones. Further, four million children across West and Central Africa are displaced by conflict.

The increasingly protracted nature of conflicts has changed the risks that children face, and the effects of this are wide-ranging. Children are at risk both physically and psychologically from witnessing and experiencing violence and the grave violations, and also impacted by the erosion of communities, infrastructure, and basic services and support.

Save the Children believe that high numbers of children are exposed to conflict and grave violations because of three core drivers:

- A lack of national-level compliance with international rules, laws and norms;
- A failure to hold perpetrators of violations to account;
- Insufficient practical action to support children and to enable their recovery.

Progress against these three drivers is possible, and is already taking place. As of 2019, 101 states had endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration, committing to keeping schools safe during conflict, 14 of which are in West and Central Africa (including Burkina

Faso, DRC, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone). Further, 110 states are signatories to the Paris Principles and commitments, including 18 in West and Central Africa (including Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone), focusing on ending the recruitment and use of children in armed forces and groups. Further, international statutes including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (see appendix 2) go some way in protecting children in conflict.

However, in order to make real progress and to stop the war on children, states must act at the national level, putting in place action plans and strategies, and engaging with non-state armed actors, in order to better protect children in conflict.

Save The Children is releasing the third annual Stop the War on Children report to highlight the different ways in which conflict affects boys and girls. Building on the two previous reports in our 'Stop the War on Children' series, the 2020 report examines these differences, and the impacts of the grave violations committed against girls and boys in conflict-affected areas.

Paul, 14, Mali

"When the attackers arrived I ran and took refuge in my mother's uncle's house with more than twenty people in the house. I was scared. The attackers set fire to the front of the house. I was afraid of being burned by the fire and I was thinking about my family. I feared for their death. In the early morning I saw our house collapsed, I knew right away that my father and my other siblings had not escaped. Later people came and buried the bodies. I don't know what I'm going to do now. I would like to go back to school to get ahead in life and one day find a job."

In conflict-affected areas of Mali, Save the Children has set up a bridge school project to enable children like Pierre to continue their learning before returning to a formal system later.

RAPE AND OTHER FORMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN, INCLUDING CHILD MARRIAGE

Globally in 2018, there were 933 verified cases of sexual violence against children³. 87% of these violations were against girls, 1.5% against boys, and in 11.5% of cases the sex was not verified. Across West and Central Africa, there were 399 verified cases of sexual violence against children. This includes 277 cases in DRC, which were all against girls.

Sexual violence continues to be used by armed actors as a broader strategy of conflict, with women and girls predominately targeted and affected⁴. Women and girls may be targeted for sexual violence as part of a deliberate strategy to dishonour and demoralise males, by violating their wives and daughters; as a 'reward' for fighters; or as a form of ethnic cleansing. Each of these shows how gendered norms and harmful traditions and practices around the honour of a woman or girls' purity is played on by armed actors.

Sexual violence in conflict is also a driver in and an impact of child marriage. 90% of births to adolescent girls occur within a child marriage, exposing girls to a various additional risks⁵. In conflict situations, girls often have limited to opportunities to avoid unwanted pregnancies, and also have inadequate access to essential services such as antenatal care and assisted childbirth. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death globally for adolescent girls aged 15-19, and girls under 15 are five times more likely to die due to pregnancy- or childbirth-related complications than women over the age of 19⁶.

The consequences of sexual violence, including child marriage, are devastating for girls. Impacts such as risks during pregnancy and child birth, psychological trauma, urinary and anal incontinence, loss of sexual pleasure, and exposure to HIV and sexually transmitted infections can have a debilitating effect on girls, and can last for the rest of their lives⁷. Girls that have survived sexual violence also often live with a stigma and distress for many years, and be perceived by others or by themselves as impure or unmarriageable.

Boys can also face devastating impacts as a result of sexual violence. In addition to psychological,

physical and developmental impacts, boys that have faced sexual violence can often feel emasculated and ashamed. Such feelings can prevent boys seeking support.

Across West and Central Africa, the prevalence of child marriage is 41%, and six of the world's ten worst countries with the highest rates of child marriage are in this region⁸. A growing body of research shows that child, early and forced marriage often increases in conflict situations⁹. 9 of the 10 countries with the highest prevalence rate of child, early and forced marriage are classified as fragile or conflict affected countries.¹⁰



NAOMI, A CHILD SURVIVOR OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Naomi* is a little girl of 8 years old from the region of North Kivu in Democratic Republic of Congo. She was playing with her friends when she was abducted by a member of an armed group operating in the nearby territory.

"It was a Thursday night, while I was playing with my friends, a group of four men emerged from the mountains. One of them kidnapped me and drove me into the field, and there he forced me to sleep with him. After doing what he wanted, he left. I was left alone in the field."

"I felt very bad. I couldn't stand myself anymore. A gentleman who was passing by found me and brought me home."

"My parents were very worried about my health. I prefer to study and play with my friends from school. At school, I learn to read and write. I am often afraid of being alone."

ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS AND HOSPITALS

"At school we only have a textbook for 10 students. We need material to study and better access to school. Everyday some children walk up to 18 kilometres to school".

Christine, 12, DRC,

Worldwide, there were 1892 attacks on schools and hospital in 2018, a rise of 32% if compared to 2017¹¹. In West and Central Africa, there were 277 cases of verified attacks on schools and hospitals, including an overall increase in number of attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Particularly in Sahel countries, schools are targeted and children and educational staffs are not safe. In October 2018, an OCHA¹² assessment analysis in the Sahel confirmed that the education sector is on its knees with schools being a prime target for extremist groups. This is serious enough when we know that children living in a context of humanitarian crisis consider education as a priority¹³. Over 10,200 schools are closed or non functional due to insecurity across Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, the Central African Republic, the DRC and Chad, depriving over 2 million children of an education.¹⁴

Data on verified attacks on schools and hospitals is not disaggregated by sex, as it documents attacks on buildings and physical structures, rather than individuals. As girls are overall 2.5 times more likely to be out of school in context settings than boys, it could be the case that a greater number of boys experience attacks on schools than girls, but this is highly context dependant¹⁵.

However, evidence points to a specific targeting of girls' education by armed actors. Often, attacks on girls' school are a direct attack on girls who are stepping outside of restrictive gender norms and expectations, and are driven by entrenched and regressive norms around gender and girls' roles and value. There are some instances of violent extremist groups who have clearly stated that they are attacking girls' schools to warn girls not to go to school, demanding that they are closed by parents and teachers, or to try and restrict mobility and dress code for girls¹⁶. When girls continue to pursue their education, armed groups have responded with

violence, damaging or destroying school structures and educational materials.

The Safe School Declaration is an inter-governmental political agreement, which aims to ensure safe education for children during armed conflict. The Global Coalition for the Protection of Education from Attack (GCPEA) have reported that, in the 12 countries that endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in 2015, there was a decline in the number of incidents of military use of schools and universities from 2015-2018¹⁷. Since the launch of the Safe Schools Declaration, Save the Children's Safe School's programme has helped to keep children safe from all hazards in and around school, and supported governments to put their commitments into practice.

Despite alarming needs, funding for education in conflict affected areas of West and Central Africa has been historically underfunded. Between 2007 and 2016 education in emergencies received only 22% of requested funding, making WCA the region with the biggest funding gap (OCHA). This is resulting in children unable to continue accessing Education services in times of emergencies. Generations of children and youth are denied their right to fully realize their potential. While children's greatest desire is to continue their education, they end up becoming trapped in situations in which they are only the victims

CHILD'S VOICE FROM BURKINA FASO

In Burkina Faso, children who have been forced to flee their villages following attacks are now staying with members of their families mostly in host families. In the area of Gorom Gorom in the Sahel region, Save the Children is working with communities to implement alternative educational approaches in safe space to enable children to access to their right to education.

"Armed men came to speak in our schools. They said that they do not want to find us in our school, that if they find us there, they will burn the school and leave us. They said that even if there are people in the school, they will not look at those people. We left the school right away. Then our school was closed."

Aisha, 13 years 'old

RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN ASSOCIATED WITH ARMED FORCES AND GROUPS

Globally, over 7000 children were recruited or used by armed forces and groups¹⁸. Of the countries which have sex disaggregated data available, 84% of those recruited or used were boys, 11% girls, and the remaining 6% were not specified. In West and Central Africa, there were 2767 verified cases of the recruitment and use of children by armed actors, including 1947 in Nigeria alone. Boys and girls are often forced to undertake different roles by armed actors, and as a consequence face different risks. The global trend shows that boys are overwhelmingly forced to participate in combat, as well as having logistical and security roles. However, in certain contexts, girls are as likely to be used in combat roles as boys. In DRC, 89% of girls recruited by one armed group were directly involved in hostilities. In the Kasai region of DRC, there have been reports of girls that are believed to have special powers being sent to the frontline as human shields. As set out in the UN Secretary-General's report on Children and Armed Conflict, in the majority of situations, girls fill support functions, such as food preparation and domestic tasks, and are at risk of being sexually abused and exploited, and of being forced into marriage when they are still children¹⁹.

Both boys and girls that have been formerly associated with armed forces or groups face many immediate and long-lasting challenges, including physical, developmental and mental health conditions. Further, social reintegration may be difficult, as these children have often lost ties to their family and community.

After release, boys risk rejection by their communities of origin. A Save the Children assessment in Nigeria shows that boys fear being killed on returning home, reflecting a stereotypical view of all boys being a threat. In contrast to boys, girls also are at risk of never being officially released and reintegrated, particularly if they have been forced into sexual relationships and child marriage. When attempting to reintegrate into society, girls may face stigma by their community, and their association with the armed actor is likely to be seen as dishonourable and impure.

Mechanisms should be established to reduce the social acceptance of the recruitment and use of children by

armed forces and groups, and children previously associated with armed forces and groups should be supported to reintegrate in their communities, including having access to mental and psychosocial support services.



MARC* ESCAPED FROM ARMED GROUP

Marc* is a 13 years old boy who lives in South Kivu, a region affected by conflict in Democratic Republic of Congo. When he was 12 years old, Marc* was forced to join an armed group operating in his area in order to protect his family from the constant attacks of the group.

"I used to cook for the armed men and became a member of the group commander's escort. I participated with other children of my age in several fights. One day, we were ambushed. I was separated from my best friend whom I found dead a few days later."

"I was too scared. Our superiors made us do things of adults."

"I haven't seen my parents in a year. I think they are still alive. I don't know if they believe that I'm already dead. I can't wait to find my family and live with them because my place is at home." I felt very bad. I couldn't stand myself anymore. A gentleman who was passing by found me and brought me home"

Marc* was rescued from the group by one of Save the Children's partner organizations on the ground. He is now living with a host family and hopes to reunite soon with his parents.

**Names have been changed to conceal identities.*

ABDUCTION OF CHILDREN

Worldwide, at least 2,500 children globally were abducted across conflict zones²⁰. Of these, 80% were boys, 19% girls, and the sex was unknown for 1% of the cases. Across West and Central Africa, there were 618 verified abductions of children in conflict. The number of verified abductions slightly decreased in DRC, from 420 in 2017 to 367, but many children that have been abducted in previous years remain in captivity, and are subject to sexual exploitation and forced labour. There are similar cases verified in Mali.

Across the world, the abduction of girls continues to increase. In February 2018, Boko Haram abducted at least 110 girls

from a girls' school in Nigeria. The high-profile abduction by Boko Haram in 2014 of 276 girls revealed their underlying rationale for abducting girls – to curtail their 'western' schooling by punishing them for their attendance at such schools, and not adhering to strict gender norms²¹. The use of abductions as attacks on girls' education can limit educational opportunities for girls. Families can fear sending girls to school, particularly in contexts where a girls value predominately lies with her reproductive and marital prospects, or where honour is tied to a girls' sexual 'purity'. Girls living in conflict settings are 90% more likely to be out of school than girls in stable situations.²²

KILLING AND MAINING OF CHILDREN

"In Mali, the situation is really critical and it's very sad. Many children have been killed, others are raped, others saw their brothers killed in front of them. People have been burned, fields have been destroyed. We need our government to hold perpetrators into account and to protect us from the horrors of war." **Mariam, youth ambassador, Mali.**

In 2018, there were 12,125 verified cases of children being killed or maimed worldwide²³. Of these, 44% were reported to be boys, 17% girls, and the sex was undocumented for the remaining 39%. Across West and Central Africa, 844 verified cases of killing and maiming occurred.

Although the global trend overwhelmingly suggests that boys are victims of killing and maiming more than girls, evidence from

UNICEF shows that in Nigeria, more girls have been used by armed groups in suicide attacks than boys. UNICEF reported that in 2018, 38 girls and 10 boys were used in suicide attacks, and in 2017, 101 girls and 45 boys were used²⁴. Researchers have suggested that the use of girls in suicide attacks can be due to the strategic advantages that derive from gendered norms and expectations, as girls are more likely to be perceived as non-threatening, or as victims.²⁵

DENIAL OF HUMANITARIAN ACCESS TO CHILDREN

In 2018, there were 795 verified incidents of the denial of humanitarian access globally²⁶. Across West and Central Africa, there were 327 verified incidents.

High numbers of verified incidents were documented in Mali and the Central African Republic. There was a sharp

increase in the number of humanitarian access incidents verified in Nigeria, rising by 560%, from 5 in 2017 to 33 in 2018.

In the Sahel region, there is a growing anti-terrorism discourse, which is sometimes used to justify restrictions on movement and information flow.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

170 million children in Africa live in areas affected by conflict, the highest absolute number of any region. The situation in countries across West and Central Africa, particularly in the Sahel region, is rapidly deteriorating, and it is likely that the number of children living in conflict across the region will increase.

With the deterioration of the situation in countries across West and Central Africa, particularly in the Sahel region, it is urgent that we act now to prevent even higher numbers of children living in conflict in the region, and the likelihood of an increase in children being victim to and witnessing grave violations. Across the region, humanitarian response plans are just 51% funded. In DRC, just \$3 is available per child in humanitarian child protection funding²⁷. Humanitarian funding needs to be increased across West and Central Africa in order to ensure that children are protected from grave violations, and to stop the war on children. Particularly at risk are children's access to education and schools during times of conflict, and also children's risk of being victim to sexual violence, including child marriage.

Through the grave violations of attacks on schools and hospitals and abduction, it is clear that there are direct attacks on children's education during conflict, particularly that of

girls. By instilling fear in communities, armed actors are limiting children's education in conflict – schools are closing, and parents are keeping their children at home. Further, boys in particular are at risk of being killed or maimed in schools, as they are more likely to attend than girls. In West and Central Africa, funding for education in emergencies is just 27.5% of what it needs to be. This results in children losing out on education, and also facing major protection risks.

When boys and girls do not go to school, they are more likely to be victim to sexual violence, and to be recruited and used by armed actors. Both of these grave violations can and does result in girls being married as children, which puts them at further risk of physical, mental, and developmental harm. Despite the increasing evidence and the significant risks that girls face from child marriage, there remain significant gaps in the data on the prevalence of child marriage. The UN Secretary-General's reports on children and armed conflict and the MRM only focus on violations perpetrated by parties to a conflict, and therefore do not capture child marriage outside of those that take place between girls and armed actors, and other child marriage data collection tools are rarely used outside of stable settings. The collection and verification of data related to child marriage in conflict and humanitarian settings must be strengthened.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the recommendations found in the Stop the War on Children 2020: Gender Matters report, we call for African Union Member States to:

- Protect education from attack, endorse the Safe Schools Declaration, and to implement and report on the implementation of its guidelines;
- Ensure the continuity of education through increased budget allocated to education in emergencies and integration of education in emergencies into government sectoral plans and policies;
- Promote alternative learning opportunities in areas where schools cannot re-open due to insecurity such as community-based education, distance learning and accelerated education;
- Support forcibly displaced refugee and IDP children and

protect them; prevent them from being recruited into or used by armed groups, human trafficking and smuggling, violent extremism and radicalisation;

- Put in place and implement mechanisms to reduce the social acceptance of the recruitment and use of girls and boys by armed forces and groups;
- Strengthen the monitoring, verification and reporting of grave violations of children's rights and report on progress made to address the six grave violations against children;
- Hold perpetrators of the six grave violations against children to account, either through formal and/ or transitional justice mechanisms;
- Implement and fully fund National Action Plans and Strategies to End Child Marriage;
- Fast track the establishment of a comprehensive Child Protection Architecture within the African Union Commission, and the appointment of an AU Special Envoy for Children in Africa;
- Ensure meaningful participation for children in decision making and accountability.

APPENDIX 1

THE SIX GRAVE VIOLATIONS

In 2005, the UN Security Council established a Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) to monitor, document, and report on violations committed against children in conflict around the world. The six grave violations include:

- Killing and maiming of children;
- Recruitment or use of children as soldiers;
- Sexual violence against children;
- Abduction of children;
- Attacks against schools or hospitals;
- Denial of humanitarian access for children.

APPENDIX 2

UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHT OF THE CHILDREN (UNCRC)

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the most widely ratified treaty in the world. It defines children as people under the age of 18, and recognises and protects their equal and indivisible social, civil, political, economic, health and cultural rights. Article 38 of the UNCRC directly address the rights of children in armed conflict, requiring states to take 'all feasible measures' to protect and care for children affected by armed conflict. The UNCRC is non-derogable even in situations of armed conflict, meaning that children are guaranteed all the fundamental rights outlined in the treaty at all times and in all contexts.

THE AFRICAN CHARTER ON THE RIGHTS AND WELFARE OF THE CHILD

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child is the only intergovernmental treaty – other than the UNCRC – to recognise and protect the full spectrum of social, civil, political, economic, health and cultural rights of children. It has been ratified by almost all states of the African Union. Article 22 directly addresses the use of children in armed conflict, prohibiting their recruitment as soldiers and direct participation in fighting wars.

Endnotes

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