The State of the World's Girls 2024

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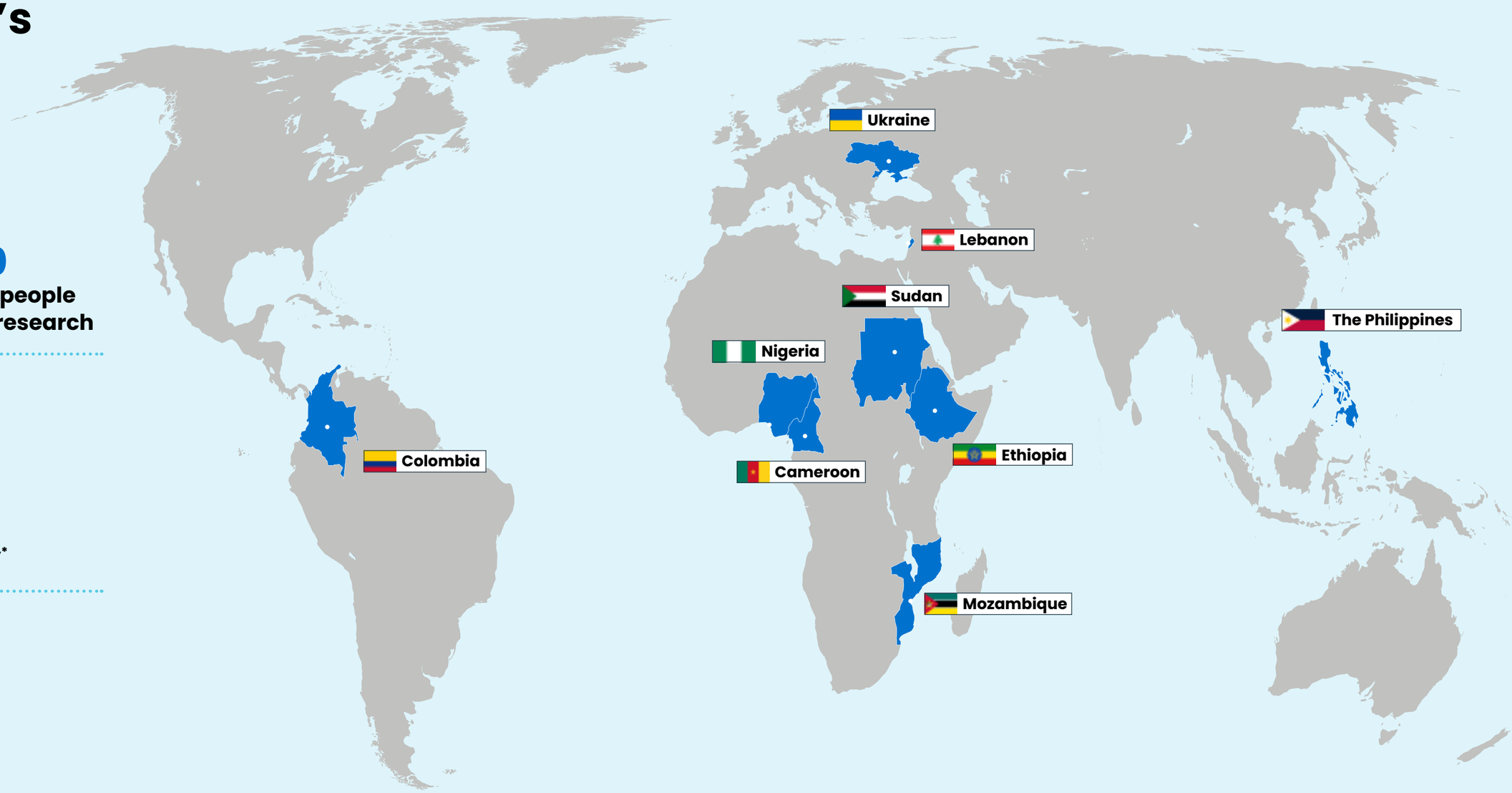
Until we are all equal



Still We Dream

Girls and young people living through conflict

The State of the World's Girls 2024



Over 10,000
children and young people participated in this research

9,995
participants in a 10-country survey*

104
in-depth interviews

Plan International published the first State of the World's Girls Report in 2007. This year's report studies the experiences of girls, boys, young women and young men, in ten countries worldwide, whose lives are dominated by conflict.

The research involved over 10,000 people. It included a large-scale survey of 9,995 participants in 10 countries* and in-depth interviews with a further 104 from Ethiopia, Cameroon, Colombia and the Philippines.

Disclaimer
Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We are impartial and neutral in conflict. Our engagement in conflict is towards ensuring we can contribute positively for girls, children, and young people.

Content warning
The experiences described by participants in this study, particularly from the interviewees, contain references to physical and sexual violence, as well as other sensitive and potentially distressing themes. Please read with care and at your own discretion.

About this map
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by Plan International.

* One country is unable to be named because of political and operational sensitivities.

Cover Photo: A 14-year-old girl who became pregnant after being displaced by conflict in Mozambique © Plan International

The Study Countries

Cameroon

The roots of the conflict in Northwest - Southwest regions of Cameroon, known as the 'Anglophone Crisis,' go back decades. It escalated in 2016, after peaceful protests of lawyers and teachers against the marginalisation of the English-speaking Northwest - Southwest.

The situation evolved into demands for secession and full-blown hostilities between non-state armed groups (NSAG) and government forces. It is now a protracted crisis marked by violence, human rights abuses, displacement, kidnapping and a humanitarian emergency. Both government security forces and NSAG have been accused of committing atrocities, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and the targeting of civilians. As of May 2024, there were 1.8 million people in need of assistance, 583,112 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 66,178 Cameroonian refugees in Nigeria.[1] Despite the severity of the violence and its effects, Plan International and the Norwegian Refugee Council have both judged the Northwest - Southwest Cameroon conflict as one of the most neglected displacement crises in the world.[2] [3]

Colombia

Conflict has been ongoing since the 1960s. Initially, the unequal distribution of land and lack of spaces for political participation paved the way for the use of violence and armed struggle. This was subsequently reinforced by the emergence of drug trafficking, narco-terrorism, and the presence of new political and armed actors in the context of revolutionary struggle.

Conflict in Colombia is characterised by the multiplicity of the different armed groups involved. According to UN Office for the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), during the second half of 2023, there was a considerable increase in the number of conflict victims, especially in July and November, caused by the interest of the Non-State Armed Groups (NSAG) in controlling mobility corridors and the rents derived from illegal economies in strategic zones. The expansion of NSAG in different regions of the country was characterised by affecting communities through continuous fighting, confrontations in their territories, threats, homicides, displacements and confinements, putting the integrity of many people at risk. The departments of the Pacific region, Putumayo, La Guajira, Cesar, Arauca, Huila, Caquetá and Amazonas are the most affected, along with those located in the Northwestern region of the country.[4]

Ethiopia

The conflict in Northern Ethiopia, often referred to as the Tigray War, extends beyond Tigray and has significantly impacted the Amhara and Afar regions as well.

According to the Oslo Peace Research Institute, conflict from 2020-2022, claimed over a hundred thousand lives.[5] The casualties have resulted from a combination of direct violence, the collapse of the healthcare system, and severe hunger. More than 21 million people urgently require assistance across Ethiopia, including 4.5 million internally displaced individuals (IDPs).[6]

A study published in July 2023 found that nearly 10 per cent of surveyed women and girls had experienced sexual violence, predominantly rape, while 30 per cent endured physical violence.[7] A peace agreement was signed in November 2022 but less than a year later fresh conflict erupted further south, further threatening the stability of the country and its government.[8]

Lebanon

Civil war lasted from 1975 to 1990 resulting in more than 150,000 people losing their lives and more than 800,000 people displaced from their homes and billions in damages in infrastructures, which left the country struggling.[9]

In recent years, the nation continued to face continuous political and economic crisis, in addition to it hosting the largest per capita refugee population (Syrian and Palestinian) with a combined total of approximately 1.75 million, which has drained the country's public services. Since 7 October 2023 the conflict on the southern borders continues to escalate and deteriorate with a further 102,523 people internally displaced, and 120 civilians including 20 children killed.[10]

In addition, essential services including water stations, schools and healthcare facilities have suffered enormous damage and 75 per cent of children are at risk of poverty.[11]

Mozambique

The Civil War lasted from 1977 to 1992 ending with the Rome General Peace Accords but in 2013, low-level conflict began again between the original opposition armed group and the current ruling government forces.

The Maputo Accord for National Peace and Reconciliation, signed in August 2019, marked the official end of the conflict. However, since 2017, Cabo Delgado, the northernmost province of Mozambique, has been embroiled in another armed conflict with a different non-state armed group and the Mozambican security forces, with assistance from Rwanda and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). It is a conflict characterised by extreme brutality, including the frequent massacre of civilians and the forcible recruitment of children.[12] 582,762 people are displaced as of 31 May 2024.[13] Some have been displaced multiple times, and many subjected to, or witnesses of, horrific acts of violence: murder, sexual assault, abductions, extortion, and the burning down of homes and villages.[14]

Nigeria

Social and economic conflicts in Nigeria frequently serve as catalysts for inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. Over the past three decades, northern Nigeria has experienced recurrent episodes of violence, often manifesting as urban riots. These conflicts have primarily involved clashes between extreme religious groups and the wider communities and, in some states, between different ethnic groups. Since 2020, Nigeria's security situation has continually deteriorated due to the dual threats of terrorism and organised gangs.

According to OCHA Nigeria is experiencing a severe humanitarian crisis, with 8.3 million people requiring humanitarian assistance and 2.2 million internally displaced individuals.[15] Nigeria has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality globally and one of the highest rates of child marriage, a situation exacerbated by the poor enforcement of national and state laws designed to prevent such practices.[16]

Sudan

Sudan's brutal war, reached its one-year mark on 15 April 2024. More than 16,000 people have been killed, and more than 12.8 million have fled their homes, many to neighbouring countries.[17] [18]

During the second civil war (2003-2020), it is estimated that between 178,000 and 462,000 people died, with 80 per cent of these deaths due to disease and malnutrition. A systematic campaign of rape was deployed as a weapon of war with the intention of ethnic cleansing.

The current conflict also is having a disproportionate effect on women and children, with allegations of rape, forced marriages, sexual slavery, and trafficking. More than 14 million children need humanitarian assistance and, with close to 4 million children displaced, Sudan is facing the largest child displacement crisis in the world.[19] On 1 August 2024 the IPC Famine Review Committee confirmed Famine in parts of North Darfur, including Zamzam Camp. It is one of Sudan's biggest displaced persons camps with an estimated 500,000 people.

The Philippines

The armed conflict in the southern Philippines between the government and Moro rebel groups, specifically the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), has lasted over 30 years, resulting in over 120,000 deaths. Both groups initially demanded an independent state for the Muslim majority in the Southern Philippines, with the MILF advocating for an Islamic state.

Despite various peace initiatives since 1976, achieving lasting peace remains difficult due to historical grievances, demographic changes, and the rise of extremist groups linked to Al Qaeda and IS after 9/11.[20] The conflict has disrupted social structures, making women and children particularly susceptible to trafficking, sexual exploitation, and abuse.[21]

Ukraine

The war in Ukraine started in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea. It escalated in February 2022, with Russia launching further attacks across Ukraine. In 2024, the UN estimates that 17.6 million people, including at least 3 million children, require humanitarian assistance.[22] There are around 5 million IDPs within Ukraine and over 6 million refugees from Ukraine still in Europe.[23]

Plan International's partners are warning of skyrocketing cases of gender-based violence, and Plan International research has found that adolescent girls and boys across the country are profoundly affected by the constant presence of danger, resulting in emotional stress: displaced Ukrainian girls aged 15-19 feel isolated and have a strong sense of longing for their previous lives that have been disrupted by war.[24] For many young people in Ukraine, online education is the only option: 3,798 education buildings have been damaged, 365 completely destroyed, and more than 2,300 schools remain closed for safety reasons.[25]

All information correct at the time of report finalisation, August 2024.



Girl attends a child friendly space in Ethiopia © Plan International

* The names of the children and young people in this report have been changed to ensure anonymity. Photos used in this report are not of research participants.

Executive Summary

This year’s State of the World’s Girls Report focuses on the experiences of young people whose lives are dominated by conflict.

We wanted to understand how the experiences of violence, educational disruption, livelihood loss, and emotional distress, brought on by conflict, vary for girls and young women, boys and young men, and how this will affect their lives in the future. What do these differences mean for humanitarian aid organisations, governments, policy makers, communities and for young people themselves and what can be done to really embed this understanding into action? The research involved a large-scale survey of 9,995 participants from ten countries – Cameroon, Colombia, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, Ukraine, the Philippines and one country that is unable to be named because of political and operational sensitivities. A further 104 from Ethiopia, Cameroon, Colombia and the Philippines took part in in-depth interviews. War affects everyone but it affects them in different ways and this report looks at the gendered dimensions of conflict: emphasising in particular the needs and rights of girls and young women who, in times of conflict, and in times of peace and plenty, are often overlooked.

> **“With regard to the impacts of the war I can say both male and females were affected equally, but [for] women it is more serious because they were raped… Boys were also affected by the war indeed, many of them were killed and there are others who have never been found after the war. So, I can say everyone was affected by the war in different ways.”** Addodas, 19, Ethiopia

In 2024, nearly 300 million people will need humanitarian support.[26] Conflict is one of the major drivers of this need and the impact on civilians and, especially, on children and young people, is devastating. They are recruited, abducted, attacked in schools and hospitals, subjected to sexual violence and denied humanitarian aid. Within all this devastation, as our research emphasises, conflict is felt differently by girls and boys, by young women and young men and these differences, captured by both the survey and the in-depth interviews, are the main focus of this report.

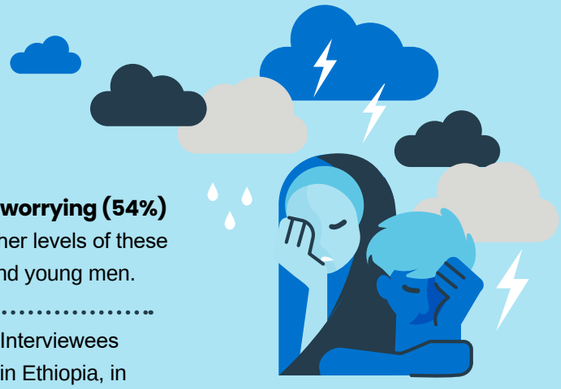
What emerges from this current study is how important it is, if support is to be effective, to understand, that different conflicts, context and identities, reveal a myriad of different experiences. Fear is a common thread, as is the struggle for basic necessities but girls and young women report much higher levels of emotional stress.

They are sexually assaulted, and their opportunities more restricted by domestic responsibilities, and pregnancy. Boys and young men are targeted to fight, many are killed and they feel responsible to be family breadwinners and protectors.

The qualitative interviews illustrate the constant brutality and trauma suffered or witnessed by many of the interviewees, whoever they are and wherever they are.

Lives have been shattered, communities and families destroyed: although both the survey and the in-depth interviews reveal clear gender differences in how conflict is experienced, everybody suffers.

Key findings



Young people reported high levels of emotional distress

including **sleep disturbances (55%*)** and **constant worrying (54%)** with girls and young women reporting significantly** higher levels of these emotional stress indicators than boys and young men.



27% of girls & young women in the survey reported **sexual and gender based violence** as a constant risk of everyday life, as did girls and young women in the interviews.

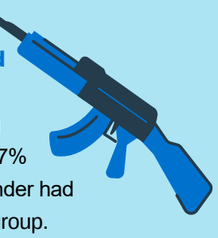
Interviewees in Ethiopia, in particular, had both witnessed and experienced extreme sexual violence against girls and young women and emphasised the **urgent need for safety and support, including mental health services**. Girls and young women made pregnant due to rape, reported being stigmatised when returning to their homes.

38% of survey respondents reported feeling unsafe or very unsafe,

with girls and young women (39%), feeling less safe than boys and young men (36%).



More than half of all survey respondents had missed out on education due to the conflict boys and young men in slightly greater numbers than girls and young women, 53% compared to 52%.



Boys and young men were targeted for recruitment in greater numbers by armed groups than girls and young women, 22% compared to 14%. Some 17% of all survey respondents aged 17 and under had been asked to join or support an armed group.



Over 45% of survey participants reported reducing their food intake: 47% of girls and young women compared to 44% of boys and young men. Girls and young women also reported having greater difficulty assessing food aid. 59% of survey participants have limited or no access to electricity and 41% have limited or no access to water.



63% of survey respondents whatever their gender identity, **had their livelihoods affected to some degree by the conflict** in their country. Financial support and help rebuilding economies emerged as a key priority throughout the research.



65% of young people want peace talks, and they want young people to be involved in them: girls were more in favour of young people being involved than boys, with 45% of young women favouring youth involvement, and 39% particularly suggesting girls and young women's involvement in peace talks.

* Percentages have been revised up or down to the nearest whole number: half points have been retained.
** Throughout the report 'significant' is used in the statistical sense: a result that is not attributable to chance.

Calls to Action

When their societies emerge from conflict, and as they live through it, young people have a lot to offer.

War can blight an entire generation but it is the experience and energy of this generation, if they are properly supported, that will help their communities survive and rebuild.

"The youths are future builders and need to be involved in peace talks."
Akungha, 24, Cameroon

It is crucial to listen to young people as they navigate their way through the complex challenges they face.

They all need to be empowered financially and educationally, they need basic necessities but also access to services that are tailored to their situations, particularly with regard to sexual and reproductive health and rights and psychosocial support, both during and post-conflict.

"Provide them with quality education, accompaniment, more than anything psychological, protection and all that."
Martha, 22, Colombia

Despite the bleakness of their current situation there is still a sense of hope for the future and the young people taking part in the research have many ideas of how they can survive conflict and rebuild in its aftermath.

Girls and young people need international bodies, national and local governments, humanitarian agencies and donors, to work together and:

- **Implement immediate ceasefires and commence meaningful peace talks aimed at lasting peace, ensuring that girls' and young people's voices and specific needs are included.**
- **Stop and condemn all grave violations against children in conflict, including recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups, killing and maiming, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, abductions, and denial of humanitarian access.**
- **Support safe and inclusive education for children and young people, including peace education, funding for the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration, and alternative learning approaches.**
- **Target humanitarian aid, making sure girls, boys, and young people have equal access to food, water and shelter, and that services for survivors of violence are prioritised, including for girls and young women.**
- **Bolster local economies and provide employment opportunities so girls, boys and young people have tailored options, recognising their different needs.**

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Foreword

Dr. Elzahra Mohammed was born in Khartoum and moved to Darfur at the age of five. She was there in 1996 when the ongoing civil war intensified and since then her life and opportunities have been marked by war. Despite this, encouraged by her parents, she qualified as a doctor.

When hostilities were resumed in 2023, she fled with her family, including her three children, to a safer part of Sudan and eventually to Egypt. Elzahra currently works for Plan International in Sudan and travels between the two countries.

I have lived with conflict most of my life, both as a child and as an adult. My early childhood was idyllic: a safe peaceful environment with gardens and mango trees, places to play safely on our own – even as young girls. We really enjoyed our life but suddenly everything changed.

The fighting reached us and we were told: "You cannot go out alone, someone may find you and kill you, or rape you." Food became scarce and expensive, schools closed and became camps for internally displaced people.

"There is a clear need to focus on girls and young women if we are to build peace."

We studied outside, under trees. Then, sometimes, while we were studying, we heard firing, people were running and we would see and hear the military aeroplanes moving around. That was very frightening for us as children – the noise from the military aeroplanes.

So, everything has changed. We lost family members. I remember my cousin. We really loved him. He was killed. He was bleeding throughout a whole day. When you hear such a story about your relative, it is very, very traumatic. And, we lived in the area near to the hospital. Every day we saw people dead or injured. War is terrible but I think for girls it is especially frightening. Even before the war, girls faced a kind of discrimination. But afterwards, the situation became very, very bad for us because young boys started to carry knives.

Sometimes, you face harassment and you cannot say anything because a boy would have a knife with him. He may attack you. We had this exam and I came first in the state, there was a ceremony. Afterwards when I was going out there were about ten boys who wanted to attack me, saying, "You are a girl. How did you come first?" I saw all this as a child and I was traumatised by my experiences.

When I became a doctor, I worked a lot with girls and young women who were abused in the war, and became pregnant. I saw one girl deliver her baby in the street. We helped her and she named one of her daughters Zahra, after me. I can understand what girls are going through. It is important to acknowledge that girls are not affected the same way as boys – they need to be treated in a different way, they have different needs, both practically and emotionally.
So that's why I try to help. I trained to work with rape survivors. When I work in camps for internally displaced people, I see girls taking risks, forced into work they would not ordinarily do. Women and girls may not always be directly targeted in attacks, but they feel the effects of conflict. Everywhere I see girls struggling for food and doing jobs to support their families, while their own needs are neglected.

I welcome this report because it is important to recognise the differences between people and to have a clear vision of the situation. To be able to help people properly you have to really understand what they are going through. Everybody who has experienced war will be going through trauma but in different ways.

As a doctor, working in Sudan, I feel grateful that I am able to do this. In my country there is a lot of sadness and suffering but there is also hope – we have to hope that things will change.

— Dr. Elzahra Mohammed



Emergency tents in a refugee camp in Sudan © Plan International

Fatima,* 23, has lived in Gaza all her life. She was forced to flee her home in October 2023, and is now living with her family of seven in a small flat in East Gaza, which they share with another family. She has engaged with Plan International as a youth ambassador and in the current conflict is determined to make sure that the voices of young people continue to be heard.

Due to the severity of the ongoing violence, we could not carry out research for this report in Gaza but Fatima, her family and many thousands of Palestinian people live with hunger, fear, death, and destruction every day. It is important that they are not silenced. Fatima's testament also speaks to the experiences of so many young people in conflicts worldwide and to emphasise the overwhelming importance of peace with justice.

* Not her real name

Living in Gaza has given me a profound and often challenging perspective on life. Growing up in a conflict zone means facing daily uncertainties and limitations. The stark contrast between my life and that of others my age in more stable regions highlights the deep disparities in opportunities and living conditions. The constant presence of conflict places significant barriers in front of our dreams and aspirations, making even simple desires, like travelling, a difficult and even humiliating process. This makes me ask one question: 'Aren't we human just like them?' And the answer?... Well, there is no answer. Living in a conflict zone has an impact on young people that may last all our lives: it restricts our access to quality education, employment opportunities, and a safe environment. Many are traumatised by witnessing violence and losing loved ones, and that can have long-term psychological effects. Additionally, economic collapse and lack of infrastructure make it hard for young people to envision a stable future, or plan for a normal life.

"Aren't we human, just like them?"

In many ways the day-to-day load is harder on women and girls who have the constant worry of taking care of their families and younger children, struggling for basic necessities and to keep them safe. But often it is the boys and men who risk their lives in the search for food. Everyone suffers. To cope with these harsh realities, young people adopt various survival strategies: we live day by day, finding solace in small joys and personal passions. Creating personal worlds, and engaging in activities we love, provides a temporary escape and a sense of normality. I take photos and write poetry. I want to be a photographer: holding onto hopes and dreams is a crucial part of survival. Despite the bleak circumstances, these dreams give us a reason to endure and push forward, even when the future seems uncertain. Effective interventions during a conflict should address both immediate needs and look to long-term stability.

Providing humanitarian aid, such as food, medical care, and psychological support, is crucial for immediate survival. Additionally, creating safe spaces for education and personal development can provide a refuge and help young people prepare for a better future. It's also essential to advocate for political solutions and peace negotiations to address the root causes of the conflict. However, now in Gaza we receive nothing. I don't feel anyone is looking out for us, the young feel abandoned by the outside world – the conflict has gone on and on and people are no longer shocked by what is happening to us. It would help me a lot if the war ended and I could go out on the street and feel safe again, although I don't know how likely that is, or whether I will still be alive after the war. But one of the things that could help me is not feeling that our cause is marginalised and everyone is ignoring it. We are dying in many ways, but has anyone thought to put themselves in my place for a day?

"There is so much I still want to do..."

— Fatima, 23, Gaza



Mother and child amid the tents in Gaza
© Tdh / Abed Zagout

Gaza

Since 2005, Gaza has been subjected to a military siege from air, land, and sea, limiting the movement of people and controlling the flow of basic materials and goods. The latest escalation of conflict in Gaza follows attacks on multiple towns in southern Israel on 7 October 2023 in which more than 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals were killed and 252 taken hostage.[27] As of August 2024, the Palestinian Ministry of Health estimates that more than 40,000 Palestinians,[28] including 14,000 children, have been killed in Gaza.[29 30]

Since October 2023:

- More than 89,364 Palestinians have been injured and 10,000 are missing. 17,000 Palestinian children are believed to be unaccompanied and separated from their families.[31 32]
- More than 10,000 Palestinians, including 630 children and 295 women, have been detained by Israeli authorities as of June 2024. With reports of torture and mistreatment of detainees and a lack of due process, concerns are raised about the arbitrariness and punitive nature of detainment of Palestinians.[33]
- Over 60 per cent of all of Gaza's homes have been destroyed or damaged,[34] and over 1.9 million people are currently displaced.[35]
- Over 90 per cent of schools in Gaza have also been damaged or destroyed and the remainder are being used as shelters.[36] There are an estimated 625,000 children with no access to education.

The conflict in Gaza is a humanitarian crisis on a catastrophic scale. Accompanying the Israeli military's bombardment of Gaza, is the Government of Israel's continued siege tactics and systematic restrictions on aid entering Gaza to meet the immense humanitarian needs of Palestinian civilians.

This includes basic commodities and lifesaving supplies. Access constraints include the arbitrary blocking of essential items.[37] Plan International and other humanitarian peer organisations[38] have issued numerous joint public statements and briefing notes decrying restrictions to humanitarian aid that prevent it from reaching Palestinian civilians, the killing of humanitarian workers, and the overwhelming obstacles to humanitarian access: actions that disregard international humanitarian law obligations as well as civilian life. There are acute health concerns due to overcrowding, and a lack of clean drinking water and proper sanitation, in addition to the deliberate destruction of the majority of medical facilities and hospitals across Gaza.[39]

Aid agencies have reported significant concerns about women being forced to undergo labour and delivery without medical aid, experiencing high rates of rape and sexual assault and having poor access to sexual and reproductive healthcare including contraception.[40] As of July 2024, Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) warned of a high risk of famine across the whole of the Gaza Strip.[41] In March 2024, just four months into the conflict, the number of children killed in Gaza already surpassed the number verified by the United Nations of children killed by conflict worldwide in the last four years.[42 43]

The catastrophic scale of violence and the vast numbers of children who have lost their entire family has led to the introduction of a new acronym by first responders and medical teams: "WCNSF" wounded child, no surviving family.[44] Mental health experts warn that children in Gaza – who had a 53 per cent rate of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) before the current conflict began – are now constantly exposed to extremely traumatic events, with no access to mental health care.[45]

The ongoing conflict in Gaza has had far-reaching and profound impacts not only among Palestinian civilians – but across the region, including Lebanon. There is the further risk of wider regional war.

Plan International, together with aid agencies and human rights organisations, continues to call for an immediate, sustained ceasefire in Gaza to save and protect lives, for all States to stop arms transfers while there is the risk they could be used to commit or facilitate violations of international humanitarian or human rights law, and for safe, consistent and unhindered routes to allow for aid to be brought into and across Gaza to meet the immense needs of Palestinian civilians.

Jerash refugee camp, Jordan, known locally as Gaza Camp © Plan International / Anthony Huus

Introduction

This year's State of the World's Girls report is looking at the experiences of girls and boys, young women and young men growing up in ten different conflict zones across the globe.

The research sought to answer three key questions:

1. **How are girls' and boys' lives shaped by the crisis in their country? What key areas and services are most affected?**
2. **How do age, gender and other intersecting characteristics play a role in the impact of conflict experienced by young people?**
3. **What shape have girls' and boys' life trajectories taken, due to the experience of conflict? What are their hopes for the future?**

The experiences of the research participants are often devastating: the normalisation of violence, the surrounding death and destruction, the hunger and fear which they describe so vividly should never be anybody's day-to-day experience.

Those who survive will struggle to come to terms with what has happened to them. Many of the young people interviewed felt that, during armed conflict, it is their age-group, both girls and boys, who suffer most. It is, however, also clear from the research that gender plays a key role in how conflict is experienced: it is horrific for everyone, but in different ways.

> **"More girls are getting married, more are leaving school, sexual violence, forced to have a baby, and they do it to gain protection from their partner."**
> Ikome, 16, Cameroon

> **"So, I can say everyone was affected by the war in different ways."**
> Addodas, 19, Ethiopia

Conflict robs an entire generation of their younger years. Traditional milestones such as completing education, getting a job, or leaving home are disrupted.

Girls and young women are disproportionately subjected to sexual violence, with resulting unintended pregnancies, boys are more likely to be recruited into armed forces and armed groups and to be killed. The struggle for basic necessities and the loss of livelihoods affects everyone. The distress of these years will have a life-long impact.

This report, based on a detailed and wide-ranging study conducted by Plan International in 2024, aims to shed light on girls and young people's experiences of conflict and its impact on their current lives and future aspirations. It also seeks to understand the gendered effects of conflict: recognising the unique challenges and differences in needs, priorities, and roles between girls, boys, young women, and young men is crucial if humanitarian aid is to be effective. Crucial too is paying close attention to what young people are telling us. The ten study countries are all experiencing conflicts that differ in nature; there are considerable differences in girls' and young people's experiences of conflict across countries, as well as commonalities. Responses need to be tailored to both the country context and to the differing experiences of girls and young people in each country.

In this study girls and young women, in particular, have had the courage to describe their experiences and articulate their hopes and needs: their voices must inform our actions.

Participants in the research discuss their shattered dreams but many are hopeful.

> **"Youths know more about the story of the crises and we are the ones going through the suffering more and we can help bring a solution."** Bate, 22, Cameroon

They are still planning for the future, their priorities are clear: put an end to conflict, protect them from violence and exploitation, support education and livelihood initiatives, provide information and resources for sexual and reproductive health, provide psychological assistance, including comprehensive support for survivors of violence, and involve them in peace-building.

> **"[Young people] know what the conflict is and they can provide a different perspective to the older people or to those who are not involved."**
> Valentina, 18, Colombia



Displaced children living in a school in Sudan © Plan International

Methodology*

Quantitative Survey:



9,995
young people

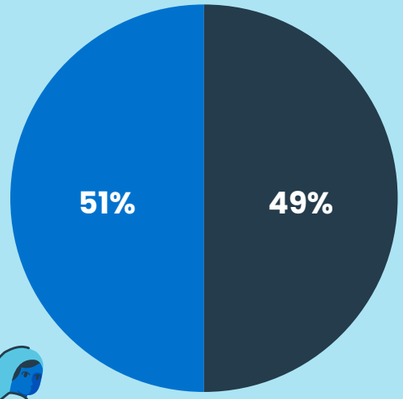


from 10
different countries



Aged
15–24

5,003
girls and young women



4,992
boys and young men



21%
of the survey respondents identified as displaced persons



10 survey countries
including Cameroon, Colombia, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, Ukraine and the Philippines**

The survey was conducted by GeoPoll, using a combination of recruitment and sampling methods

* For detailed methodology please see the 2024 State of the World's Girls Technical Report at the following link: plan-international.org/still-we-dream
** One country is unable to be named because of political and operational sensitivities.

Qualitative Research:

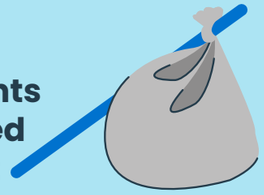
Interviews with 104 participants aged 13-24 across

Cameroon, Colombia, Ethiopia and the Philippines



15%
of participants were young parents

60%
of participants were displaced due to conflict



The interview questions were conducted in a semi-structured format meaning not every question was asked to all participants. In the interest of being youth-centred, this allowed for an open-ended discussion directed by the interviewee. The interviews could be explorative in the exchange but not overload participants with too many questions.



Ethics and Safeguarding:

Research ethics approval was granted from the UK-based Overseas Development Institute's Research Ethics Committee.

A full safeguarding risk assessment was conducted in collaboration with Country Office staff to identify potential risks and mitigation measures for all data collection methods. A range of sensitive information was shared by participants, and so safeguarding procedures were initiated, and support was provided in line with our safeguarding policy, including access to comprehensive case management services.

Key to Plan International's ethical approach is for participants' responses to be recognised at the national and local level, by embedding their voices, experiences and concerns into relevant policy and programming.

What We Have Learned

A review of relevant research tells us that in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan and Ethiopia, and in many other conflict-affected countries, girls and young people share similar experiences of loss, fear and destruction which can have lifelong implications for their physical and psychological wellbeing and in terms of opportunities missed.[46]

In many areas conflict comes hand in hand with other humanitarian crises – famine, flood, drought – which increase violence and suffering.[47] [48] In this current research, whilst acknowledging similarities, we are looking at the detail and the differences. How does gender affect your experience of conflict? Where are the key variances and what does this mean for survival, and for rebuilding countries and communities in conflict's aftermath?

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A man looks at a block of flats which was damaged by an airstrike in Ukraine © Plan International / Viacheslav Ratynskyi

"I am not really coping..."

The overall impact of conflict

Later in the report we will examine some of the key themes addressed in the research in greater depth.

This section demonstrates the breadth of the different overall effects of conflict which range from lack of shelter, food and water, to displacement and destroyed livelihoods, to violence and death. What emerges from this research is the sheer horror of day-to-day existence. Experiences of course vary, by gender and location, by poverty and family circumstances, by ethnicity, age and personal characteristics. But the struggle for survival affects everyone.

Girls and young women, it seems, struggle with getting enough to eat and drink or accessing services like the internet - reflecting well-documented pre-existing gender inequality within the family where girls' needs are rarely prioritised.[49]

When young people were asked about the effect of conflict on their lives it was clear that many lacked basic necessities:

41% reported no or very limited access to water

44% reported no or very limited access to food

59% reported no or very limited access to electricity

49% reported no or very limited access to the internet or phone



Syrian refugees look out from their tent in a camp in Lebanon © Plan International / Hussein Nouredine

Table One: Participants' experiences of conflict, by gender identity

Have you experienced any of the following as a result of conflict in your country or region?	Girls and young women		Boys and young men		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	**Count**	**%**
No or very limited access to electricity/gas/fuel etc.	2910	59.40%	2825	57.90%	**5735**	**58.60%**
No or very limited internet or phone access	**2486**	**50.70%**	**2268**	**46.50%**	4754	48.60%
No or very limited access to food	**2204**	**45.00%**	**2069**	**42.40%**	4273	43.70%
No or very limited access to water	**2141**	**43.70%**	**1897**	**38.90%**	4038	41.30%
Had to interrupt your education	1988	40.60%	1916	39.30%	**3904**	**39.90%**
No or very limited access to health care	1762	36.00%	1734	35.50%	**3496**	**35.80%**
Lost means of income [e.g. job/ revenue/farm land]	1508	30.80%	1469	30.10%	**2977**	**30.40%**
Lost your belongings or your property	1337	27.30%	1394	28.60%	**2731**	**27.90%**
Separated from immediate family and currently living on my own	624	12.70%	698	14.30%	**1322**	**13.50%**
Separated from my immediate family [living with non-family members or neighbours]	432	8.80%	441	9.00%	**873**	**8.90%**
None of the above	631	12.90%	630	12.90%	**1261**	**12.90%**
TOTAL	**4900**	**100.00%**	**4879**	**100.00%**	**9779**	**100.00%**

Significant gendered impacts

There were significant gender differences for reports of no or very limited access to food, water and the internet. Larger numbers of girls and young women, in comparison to boys and young men, reported difficulties in accessing basic needs.

The in-depth interviews underline the hardship experienced as families struggle for food and water and are forced from their homes.

> **"The crisis has affected me and my family, having to move away from home and getting adapted with a different kind of lifestyle that we are not used to as things are no longer the way they used to be while back home. We get to buy nearly everything here and we have no farmland to farm on… The most important change is moving from my hometown to a strange place where I have never been before."** Dalma, 13, Cameroon

Over half of the participants from the four countries taking part in the qualitative interviews were currently displaced or had been previously displaced and had returned home. Many had experienced violence and some had lost loved ones, not to mention disruption to education and livelihoods.

> **"Literally the only thing we took out was clothes. They didn't warn us or give us a time for example say: 'you have 15 days to leave', but they immediately arrived and said leave with what you can, then we took what we could… we had a hard time, my brothers left, at that time my mom got sick."**
> Raquel, 22, Colombia

Many interviewees reported that they were barely coping: Bessong, whose father used to support the family, now finds herself responsible for her grandmother and her young child.

> **"I am not really coping because feeding is a problem, and my grandma is old and has medical bills which I have to struggle to take care of along with my child and myself. The child's father helps me, but he does not give enough. At times he beats me and threatens to send my grandma out of the house, since he is the one paying for it."**
> Bessong, 24, Cameroon*

Interviewees in Ethiopia also described having to flee their homes and struggling with new living conditions:

> **"In the [camp] I live alone, and we totally rely on aid we get to survive. Sometimes we don't get the aid monthly and when failed to get the aid we beg for food… Here, ten people live in a single room and it's difficult to survive."**
> Tigray,** 18, Ethiopia



Community where Plan International has launched an emergency aid project to support Venezuelan families in Colombia © Plan International / Anika Büssemeier

* A safeguarding follow up was organised for this participant.
** The participant chose 'Tigray' as her pseudonym. This is not to be confused with the region in Ethiopia, Tigray, that is also mentioned in this report, or the participant named Etigray (girl, 16).

Others in Ethiopia discussed the different ways girls and boys, young men and young women were affected by conflict.

> **"The impact of the war is harsher on young females, and we have experienced so many challenges during those moments. Many girls were raped during the war. In addition, compared to boys, we spend most of our time working in the house. This means there is a lot of burden on girls. Therefore, all these challenges bring depression among many young girls and most of these young girls have some sort of mental illness."** Dansha, 17, Ethiopia

Families in Colombia were sometimes forced to flee several times. Participants described constant violence, where family members had been killed or disappeared at the hands of armed groups. Many lived in a prolonged state of fear.

> **"The paracos° used to break in… One time they came in… they were going to kill my dad, so he had to leave, everyone had to leave with nothing…"** Valentina, 18, Colombia

In Colombia interviewees also commented that violence and murder are normalised across communities: shoot-outs are commonplace when new gangs move into the neighbourhoods. This everyday violence was their primary experience of conflict, overriding and compounding the struggle for basic necessities. They also felt that the police were useless and had no control over armed gangs. There was little freedom of movement – there are "invisible barriers and borders" in place and in crossing them you risk your life.

In the Philippines, also, participants described living amidst gunshots and violence. Mariam 21, noted the double impact of conflict and natural disasters on her community explaining that it was "full of conflicts, floods and clan feuds".

Many in the Philippines were struggling financially and had been displaced multiple times:

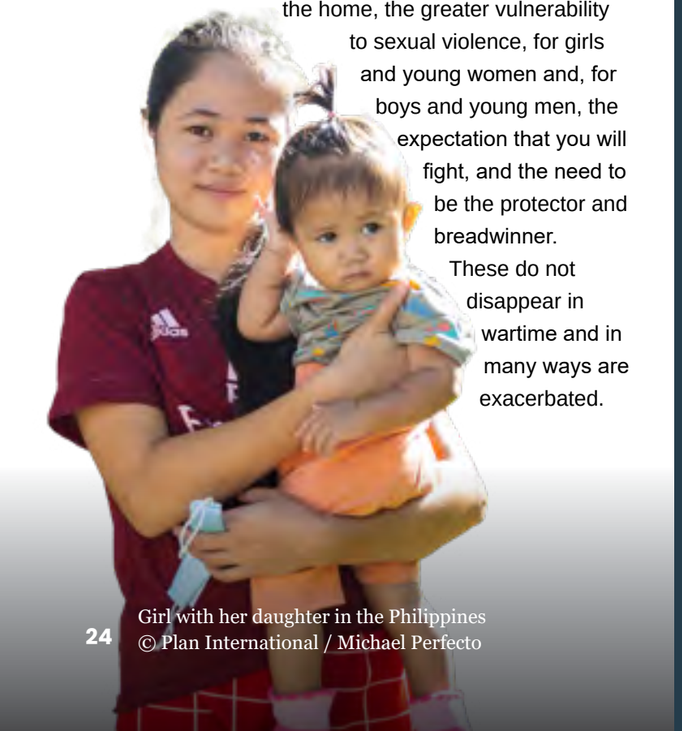
> **"The number of times we evacuated is countless…Some of us would be cooking, and we'd have to leave our food behind… It's especially difficult when those evacuating are already struggling financially. It's even harder for them to seek refuge in other people's places…"**
> Mahid, 18, Philippines

° Colombian slang for "paramilitaries"

In the Philippines, as in Ethiopia, respondents discussed the different effects of the disruption of conflict on girls and boys, young women and young men. Here, unlike Ethiopia, where sexual violence was highlighted as the major source of suffering, interviewees focused more on women's domestic roles, the daily struggle for sheer survival, increasing their responsibilities and their anxiety.

> **"Women are more affected. Men are affected too, but women even more so, because they are given the responsibility of taking care of small children, and they don't have anyone to help them take care of and carry the children whenever they evacuate due to conflict. Perhaps because they're thinking about how to meet their daily needs. I know they're struggling, but women are struggling even more."**
> Fatima, 15, Philippines

Experiences of conflict, of displacement, violence and the struggle for food, water and basic services, are often conditioned by gender and pre-existing gender roles: the responsibility for childcare and the home, the greater vulnerability to sexual violence, for girls and young women and, for boys and young men, the expectation that you will fight, and the need to be the protector and breadwinner. These do not disappear in wartime and in many ways are exacerbated.



Girl with her daughter in the Philippines
© Plan International / Michael Perfecto

Study: Promising Practice

Plan International Ethiopia

When conflict erupted in her village, Amina (16) and her family were forced to flee, leaving everything behind. Conflict in Northern Ethiopia has left scars on girls like Amina. Displaced from Amhara region, a flash point of the conflict, and highly distressed from constant anxiety and fear, Amina struggled to cope: lack of food, no access to education, or any of the normal everyday activities that children enjoy, made everything worse. Children in this area, have witnessed violence and experienced things that no child should ever live through. Several girls like Amina were separated from their families and friends and carried painful memories.

The Programme

In response to Amina, the many children like her, and to the sudden and high levels of overall humanitarian need amongst conflict impacted and displaced people, Plan International Ethiopia launched a multi-faceted humanitarian response. Addressing life-saving and protection needs remained the priority.

The programme also considered the medium- and long-term needs of both displaced people and their host communities.

Listening directly to girls and women helped to prioritise child survivors of violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, and provide gender-and age-responsive, comprehensive services that address their needs, bolster dignity and restore hope.

A key component of Plan International's services focussed on providing case management and psychosocial services for child survivors of violence, alongside other support. Through individual and group care and support sessions, our trained case workers and psychosocial support workers helped Amina to cope, regain her sense of self, and find a path to healing. Instrumental in this have been the safe spaces created for affected communities, including child survivors, to come together, share their stories, and support each other in a community of healing and resilience.

A key learning is that the true impact of the services for child survivors of violence contribute to more than individual recovery. Recognising the importance of systemic change, Plan International Ethiopia also contributed to advocacy, policy and humanitarian diplomacy initiatives that brought together members of the parliament. We worked with government and other humanitarian actors to increase awareness and advocate for improved services for child survivors of violence. There were numerous challenges to initiate and sustain the project: limited funding, constant movement or displacement of survivors, stigma around mental health issues and the lack of pre-existing tools and mechanisms to promote accountability.

Plan International Ethiopia stayed and delivered vital services in the conflict-affected areas to honour our social contract with communities where we have had a long-term presence: making sure that no one, especially at-risk girls, was left behind.

Our work with child survivors of violence is an example of a much-needed integrated approach for communities who have lost everything in a conflict. It further highlights the importance of a cohesive approach combining mental health and psychosocial support, sexual and reproductive health and rights, child protection case management, education, and services to address core humanitarian needs such as food and livelihood. Direct service delivery has better impact when such work is combined with policy, advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy efforts. It is this integrated approach that adds unique value in the context and helps survivors like Amina to rebuild their lives with dignity and hope.

Our programmes are designed, not only to meet the immediate needs of children like Amina, but also to empower them with the tools and support necessary to recover and build the future they deserve. In staying and delivering, we affirm our unwavering commitment to the most vulnerable, ensuring that no child is left behind, even in the most challenging circumstances.



Girl living with her mother and sister in a displacement camp in Ethiopia
© Plan International

"Violence has increased because parties feel they have power over all and can do what they like..."

Feeling Unsafe: the experience of violence in everyday life

It is in the fear and experience of violence where gender differences emerge most clearly: apparent in the vivid descriptions of their circumstances from both young women and young men, girls and boys.

In the main it is young men who fight wars.[50] They are drawn to, or forced into, armed forces and groups and, as the interviewees point out, more of them die as a direct result of conflict.

> **"During the war women have experienced many worse attacks and harassment. They have also been forced to make wrong decisions in their life like a [child] marriage.... We women have experienced incidents like being raped and harassed, but the majority of young boys are dead due to the war."** Sheraro, 17, Ethiopia

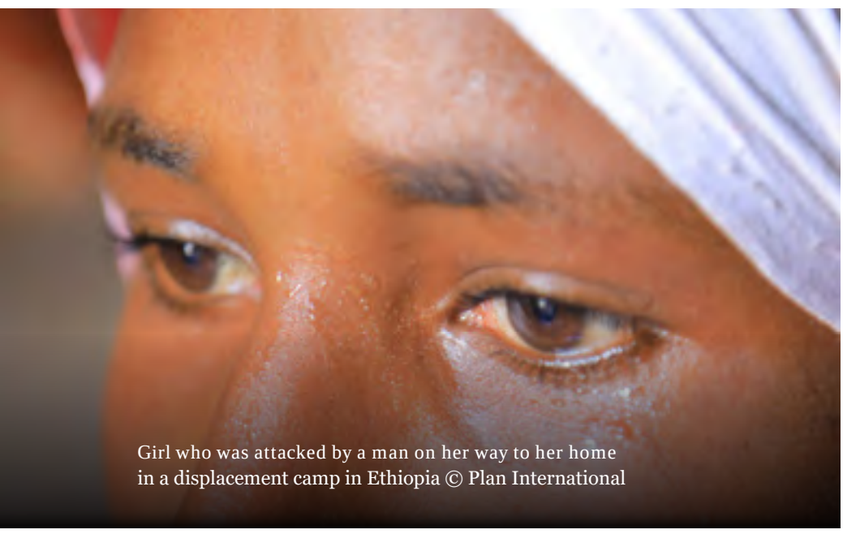
Girls and young women, though this is not exclusive to girls and women, are left dealing with the struggles of day-to-day existence and the trauma of sexual violence.

The extreme forms of sexual aggression reported, most notably, though not exclusively, in Northern Ethiopia, indicate that sexual violence is systematically used as a weapon of war, with devastating and life-long consequences for girls and young women. What emerges most strongly in Ethiopia are graphic and horrifying descriptions of sexual violence against women with many interviewees describing their own personal experiences and others only too aware how at-risk girls and young women are:

> **"When the war broke out, there was an effort to take women out of this area... The women left behind were raped."** Aculle, 18, Ethiopia

Three female participants from Ethiopia had direct experiences of sexual violence including rape or gang-rape by armed groups. Two had been held captive for weeks.

> **"In that house they raped me in a group for five days."** Axum, 20, Ethiopia



Girl who was attacked by a man on her way to her home in a displacement camp in Ethiopia © Plan International

27%
of girls and young women, compared to
17%
of boys and young men, felt at risk of sexual violence.

Sexual violence was discussed as widespread, common, and targeted against all women and girls:

> **"There are many girls who were attacked like me during the war, and even mothers who were raped in front of their children and husband."** Shire,21, Ethiopia

Girls and young women also highlighted the devastating consequences of rape including unintended pregnancies, social stigma and exclusion.

One woman was raped publicly, and she became pregnant; her husband and family have ostracised her, she has no one to help, has had no medical treatment and became isolated and withdrawn.

It is not a unique situation. Others, including Shire who spoke from personal experience, discussed survivors of sexual violence as being discriminated against and struggling, with little chance of returning to any form of normal life:

> **"After the war when those people try to mock you for what you have gone through, it poses another challenge which leads to depression. For example, I love my home where I was born and raised, but I don't want to get back or live there anymore. That is because I don't want to live with the kind of society who mock your pain."** Shire, 21, Ethiopia

Reading these horrific descriptions of violence witnessed or experienced by those taking part in the in-depth interviews it is perhaps surprising that, overall, only 38 per cent of survey respondents report feeling unsafe or very unsafe.

There was, however, danger from a variety of causes and children and young people in all countries reported feeling most at risk from:

46%
shootings

34%
lootings

34%
disruption to employment

31.5%
hunger

30%
airstrikes

In all the categories cited above, in which perceived risk was at its highest, girls and young women felt significantly more at risk than boys and young men.

They also felt at greater risk from physical and sexual violence and being forced to marry, as well as not being able to get to school or health clinics.

The gap between female and male perceptions of being at risk from sexual violence – 27 per cent for girls and young women, against 17 per cent for boys and young men – and being forced to marry, 14 per cent versus 9 per cent, is particularly large.

Table Two: Participants' perceptions of what they are most at risk due to conflict, by gender

What do you feel most at risk from as a result of the conflict in the region or country where you currently live?	Girls and young women		Boys and young men		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Shootings	**2339**	**47.80%**	**2170**	**44.40%**	4509	46.10%
Lootings	**1749**	**35.70%**	**1579**	**32.30%**	3328	34.00%
Disruption to employment	**1727**	**35.30%**	**1587**	**32.50%**	3314	33.90%
Hunger	**1642**	**33.50%**	**1438**	**29.40%**	3080	31.50%
Airstrikes/bombs	**1509**	**30.80%**	**1451**	**29.70%**	2960	30.20%
Not being able to go to school	1350	27.60%	1161	23.70%	2511	25.70%
Sexual violence	1336	27.30%	852	17.40%	2188	22.40%
Hostage taking	1299	26.50%	1185	24.20%	2484	25.40%
Physical violence	1257	25.70%	1041	21.30%	2298	23.50%
Not being able to go to hospitals/clinics	1189	24.30%	1044	21.40%	2233	22.80%
Landmines	904	18.50%	768	15.70%	1672	17.10%
Being forced to fight or join the army	898	18.30%	953	19.50%	1851	18.90%
Being forced to marry	703	14.40%	426	8.70%	1129	11.50%
None of the above	609	12.40%	625	12.80%	1234	12.60%
TOTAL	**4897**	**100.00%**	**4889**	**100.00%**	**9786**	**100.00%**

Significant gendered impacts

Girls and young women reported feeling significantly less safe than boys and young men.

These gender differences are emphasised in the in-depth interviews. In Cameroon participants observed clear gendered differences in safety risks.

Most of the female participants in Cameroon thought that women and girls were at risk because they were "weaker": if they have to run, or fight, they could be "violated."

Boys and men, as one girl noted, were seen to be more at risk from harassment, arbitrary arrests and being killed by the military or armed groups

> **"Boys are also afraid because the military can mistake them for the Amba boys.*"** Tabe, 14, Cameroon

* Armed separatist fighters from Cameroon's English-speaking regions

Survey respondents were also asked about increases in violence due to the conflict and who the perpetrators were: the majority reported increases in kidnapping, sexual assault or violence, and child labour, with armed groups and strangers identified as mainly responsible.

In all the in-depth interviews, apart from in the Philippines where the question was raised with very few participants, violence was seen as prevalent and having increased.

> **"It has increased because both parties feel they have power over all and can do what they like and nobody will question their acts."** Ikome, 16, Cameroon

> **"Men have tension due to poverty and beat the woman out of frustration."** Bessong, 24, Cameroon

In Colombia, though some participants felt that the violence was not as bad as it had been in previous years, gendered difference in safety remained, with girls and women seen as more at risk than boys or men. Many mentioned harassment or sexual violence and had heard cases of rape. Martha disclosed that she had narrowly escaped rape and that one of her sisters was raped several times:

> **"They used to give her drinks, adulterated, they would take her away and she would arrive home without knowledge, because she was drugged and it's by force."** Martha, 22, Colombia

Robbery, extortion and getting caught in the crossfire between the various armed gangs affected many of the interviewees: young people in general, regardless of gender, were thought to be at greater risk of violence:

> **"Because every day you see that they killed a young person, 22 years old, 17 years old."** Martha, 22, Colombia

Some participants felt that violence against children and young people had been exacerbated by conflict and by COVID-19. Yirlesa, 18, noted that children are exposed to physical, verbal and psychological violence and this has increased, "now, everyone has a gun." She also said since the conflict began, it is now more common to see young children aged 13 or 14 with guns for robbing people.

In Ethiopia, also, young people were seen as having been killed or injured in greater numbers:

> **"There are many people who were dead from heavy artilleries fired during the war, others were killed with bombs dropped by drones and planes. Many young people were killed during the war including many of my friends. Many youths joined the war because they were left without any option. As a result, most of them lost their lives."** Arbeti, 15, Ethiopia

> **"During the war heavy artilleries has been fired into the town and it left many casualties... We counted the bodies of around 60 people whom [sic] were mostly youngsters, and we buried them. We buried 10 bodies in one hole at a time because it is difficult for us to dig and prepare individual burial places."** Barri,24, Ethiopia

"I believe no one loves war unless they were run out of options..."

The fear of armed groups

Much of the violence described was attributed to armed forces and armed groups. In the case of Colombia, armed groups controlled neighbourhoods, using gang violence and making money from extortion and drug running.

Overall, in all conflict settings surveyed, there was an awareness of active child recruitment and of young people joining armed forces or armed groups:

18% of survey participants **had been asked to join or support an armed group**: 17% of 15-17-year-olds had been asked to join or support an armed group.

Boys and young men are more likely to be asked to join an armed group than girls and young women.

14%, **a substantial minority of girls and young women**, against 22% for boys and young men **had been asked to join an armed group.**

31% of participants reported that when they had joined an armed group, they **had done it voluntarily.** 33% of 15-19-year-olds describing their involvement as voluntary.

25% of 15-19-year-olds disclosed that they had **joined armed groups due to being threatened or coerced.**

Sudan participants were the most likely to have been approached by an armed group, followed closely by Mozambique and Ethiopia.

> **"Boys join armed groups more than girls because they think they will be respected and they would have more power."**
> Dalma, 13, Cameroon

How voluntary the entry of young people into armed forces or groups can actually be in times of violent conflict is questionable: the child protection in humanitarian action community, and international law, considers that child recruitment is never voluntary but is always coerced by context or a child's experience.

This is backed up by the research findings: according to the in-depth interviews from Cameroon, Colombia, Ethiopia and the Philippines there are many and varied reasons for joining an armed group, all caused by the conflict they are embroiled in, including lack of employment opportunities, the need for protection and the desire for revenge.

Some participants commented on the gender roles within the armed groups: on the whole boys/young men were fighters and girls/young women were spies, nurses and cooks. Wider research does not always back this up and girls and young women operate as armed combatants too.[51]

Interviewees in Colombia describe some members of armed groups as manipulative, targeting children or young people they see with a "weakness" such as a child in poverty or with a bad home life. They also target children or young people who have stopped going to school and hang around bars or pool halls: they pick on those who are not studying and offer money or drugs.

Ana, 24, said girls in the rural villages often end up with members of armed groups as they don't have the means to study, and the groups take advantage of this.

Another participant in Colombia explained how they entice children:

> **"'Kid there's no opportunities here, you have to stick to whatever comes to you' and if they tell you, 'Here you are going to earn a considerable amount of money that you can help your family', then they have a way, there is an easy path, then that dazzles the young person's mind: 'Wow! I want to join.' Without knowing first what risks they face."**
> Calle, 21, Colombia

Children and young people run errands, sell and distribute drugs and act as spies.

> **"That's his job, he has to record, and he has to send evidence of what is going on, who is coming in and who is going out. Anyone he sees as strange he has to report it. If they are going to do a search, he has to tell them."** Johana, 17, Colombia



Young man who is part of a programme providing economic alternatives to joining armed groups in the Philippines © Plan International / Michael Perfecto

In Ethiopia participants felt that most young people, mainly boys and young men, who joined armed forces and armed groups were forced into it by their experiences of war:

> **"The participation of the youth in the war has been enormous, and that was because the youth witnessed different atrocities committed on their family members. Some of them witnessed the rape of their sisters or mother, some other the killings of their brothers and other forcing factors. I can say that the youth haven't chosen to go to war but rather they were forced by incidents mentioned above that forced them to join the war."** Korem, 18, Ethiopia

In the Philippines, nearly all the participants stated that only males join armed groups and most of them for religious reasons.

> **"Men are stronger. Their role is to defend if there are enemies in Islam that could cause harm, to provide security if there are threats... Here in our area, there are no women [joining armed groups] because they are afraid of that."** Mahid, 18, Philippines

Other reasons given were to earn a salary, make friends or get a chance to handle firearms.

> **"The only reminder from our parents is not to get involved in such activities because that's not the solution. You might just end up being targeted by the enemy, and it might worsen the situation. My grandfather also said that we should just focus on studying because that's the most effective weapon that can help us."** Youssef, 17, Philippines

It is illegal under international law for armed forces and armed groups to recruit and use children under 18, and it is one of the 6 grave violations of children's rights in conflict.

Case Study: Promising Practice

Plan International Mozambique

Plan International leads a global humanitarian task force that supports programmes to prevent recruitment, facilitate release and respond to the needs of children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG).

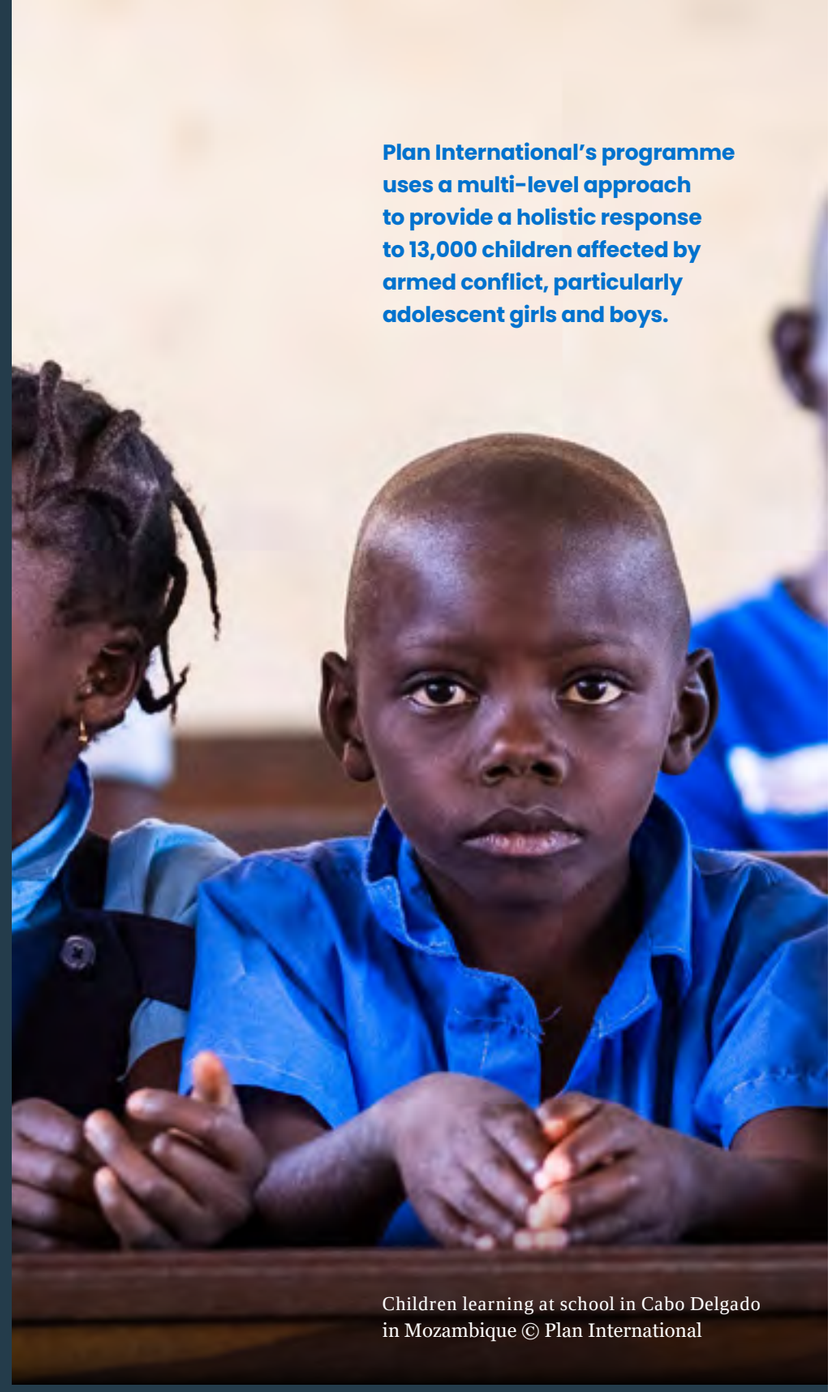
In collaboration with the Government of Mozambique and UNICEF, Plan International developed a comprehensive programme to prevent and respond to child recruitment and conflict-related sexual violence against children and adolescents in Northern Mozambique. Since 2017, ongoing conflict in Cabo Delgado province of Northern Mozambique has had a devastating impact on children and all civilians. As of May 2024, 582,762 people have been displaced:[52] with almost 100,000 people, including 60,000 children, displaced recently in just one month.[53] Thousands of children have become separated from their families and are at risk of violence and exploitation, including recruitment and use by armed groups, one of the six grave violations of children's rights in conflict according to the UN.[54] Although precise figures are lacking, anecdotal evidence in Mozambique shows that particularly younger adolescent boys are targeted by armed groups whilst girls are at increased risk of sexual violence, another grave violation. Whilst some adolescents are kidnapped by armed groups, others are pressured to join with the promise of a better life.

The Programme

The programme involves the following strategies to prevent and respond to child recruitment:

1. Ensuring that children recruited by armed groups are identified and supported to return to their families. The programme supports communities to monitor, identify and report at-risk children including children associated with armed forces and armed groups. A total of 3,000 children received case management services, individual social work-type support, to help them return to their families and reintegrate into their communities. Reintegrated adolescents and their families receive financial support as well as social support, with access to psychosocial and medical services and skill-building opportunities.
2. Preventing child recruitment by making families and communities aware of the risks. The programme provides information to 10,000 children, adolescents, and their families to make them aware of the strategies used by armed groups to recruit children, the consequences of recruitment, and what they can do to prevent this. By involving children and adolescents in community activities designed for them, the programme offers alternatives to joining armed groups.

Plan International's programme uses a multi-level approach to provide a holistic response to 13,000 children affected by armed conflict, particularly adolescent girls and boys.



Children learning at school in Cabo Delgado in Mozambique © Plan International

Despite the challenges of insecurity, ongoing displacement and the limited visibility of children currently associated with armed groups, this programme offers a comprehensive and promising approach to both the prevention of and the response to child recruitment in Mozambique.

"There are many students who dropped out..."

Education: a casualty of war

Education is always under threat when violence escalates and despite a general acknowledgment of the central importance of education in their lives many survey respondents report missing out.

52% of girls and young women **53% of boys** and young men **reported missing education because of conflict.**

The average duration of missed education was one to 2 years, with more boys and young men than girls and young women reporting being out of school for longer periods of time.

27% of girls and young women, compared to **22.5% of boys** and young men, **reported feeling unsafe when travelling to and from school.**

25% of girls compared to **23% of boys** reported that they **lost schooling because their school was damaged or destroyed.**

30% of young people reported that they could no longer attend school because they **were forced to flee.**

What has emerged unexpectedly from the survey is that boys and young men's education appears more affected than girls' and young women's: many earlier studies had found that, in times of stress, families prioritise boys' education over girls'.[55] Boys' education in emergencies may have been neglected as a result and this needs attention.[56]

Table Three: Participants reasons for missed education due to conflict, by gender.

Why did you have to miss parts of your education because of conflict?	Girls and young women		Boys and young men		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Your school was closed in the conflict	1452	58.20%	1386	55.00%	**2838**	**56.60%**
You had to flee your home and couldn't access school anymore	749	30.00%	748	29.70%	**1497**	**29.90%**
You did not feel safe travelling to or from school	666	26.70%	566	22.50%	**1232**	**24.60%**
Your school was destroyed/ damaged in the conflict	629	25.20%	584	23.20%	**1213**	**24.20%**
You needed to find employment/ income instead	**490**	**19.70%**	**564**	**22.40%**	1054	21.00%
You needed to support other family members at home	**445**	**17.80%**	**462**	**18.30%**	907	18.10%
Your school was used as a shelter	414	16.60%	402	16.00%	**816**	**16.30%**
There was no teacher anymore	390	15.60%	339	13.50%	**729**	**14.50%**
You had to stay home for household chores or caring for family members	303	12.20%	255	10.10%	**558**	**11.10%**
Your school was occupied by armed forces groups	252	10.10%	247	9.80%	**499**	**10.00%**
You didn't know how to register at a new school	149	6.00%	121	4.80%	**270**	**5.40%**
You were sick or wounded so could not attend school	147	5.90%	116	4.60%	**263**	**5.20%**
You faced a language barrier	129	5.20%	95	3.80%	**224**	**4.50%**
You could not return to school because of forced marriage	84	3.40%	54	2.10%	**138**	**2.80%**
None of the above	83	3.30%	103	4.10%	**186**	**3.70%**
TOTAL	**2493**	**100.00%**	**2520**	**100.00%**	**5013**	**100.00%**

Significant gendered impacts

Girls are more likely to miss school in almost all cases, except where more boys reported they are missing education so they can find employment or to support their family.

The reasons for missing out on education ranged from schools being closed, damaged or destroyed, needing to support families both financially and practically, with more boys reporting that they need to find an income instead of going to school, child marriage, or the journey to school being too dangerous. The in-depth interviews largely back this up with safety concerns, and early pregnancy discussed as affecting girls' school attendance and recruitment by armed groups affecting boys.

> **"I think the number is about equal because as girls are getting pregnant some boys are busy joining the armed groups."** Yong, 23, Cameroon

> **"If you get pregnant at an early age, and not because you are pregnant, but because you are ashamed of other classmates seeing you, you leave school. [sic]"** Yirlesa, 18, Colombia

Many participants also talked about financial constraints compounding the safety issues:

> **"So, let's say, if they don't have enough money for the motorcycle ride or if they do, but only for the way back from the house and the road, there are some who have to get up early or come back in the evening at 6 o'clock in the afternoon, so going there is a danger, a risk."** Ana, 24, Colombia

In the Philippines many cited greater pressure on boys and young men to leave education to contribute to the family income:

> **"Because when they stop schooling, they tend to contribute more to their families by selling goods or working. Because of this, they often do not return to school."** Rania, 21, Philippines

In Ethiopia over half of interviewee participants had dropped out with many expressing a keen desire to continue studying. Aba-Ala was shot in the back, and, due to the pain she suffers, sitting for long periods of time, she had to leave school:

> **"I wish there could be a solution for my problems. I still have a great interest to learn. I feel very bad when I think of the overall situations and my health condition that forced me to stop learning."** Aba-Ala, 18, Ethiopia

Several participants in Ethiopia discussed the gendered barriers to education: some thinking parents were more inclined to keep girls at home to help with the housework and others citing the role of child marriage and early pregnancy.



Children walking home from school in Colombia © Plan International

52% of survey respondents reported missing out on education due to the conflict.



Young girl learning in her accelerated education class in Nigeria © Plan International

> **"After the war, all the girls got married and they have children now. They also stopped learning."** Aba-Ala, 18, Ethiopia

Etigray* gave up education in grade six to support her mother and help keep her sisters in school:

> **"In order to support them in their educational materials, and other necessary things, I wash people's clothes by going door to door. Even though I am expected to be in school at this age, I have no choice but to work and support my family... I feel miserable because I want to attend my education and become a productive person in the future."** Etigray, 16, Ethiopia

Everywhere girls and young people wanted better security in and around schools, financial help, and psychosocial support: many felt that the distress they continue to experience made it so much harder to get back into learning.

> **"I think encouraging them to have emotional support. They should go to a psychologist, one thinks it's not necessary, but there are really things that need to be talked about and that they need to let go of. Encourage them to go to a psychologist or to have support."** Valentina, 22, Colombia

To a large extent, interviewees in all four countries felt that the impact of armed conflict on education was felt fairly equally by boys and girls, young women and young men. They had all suffered from the surrounding violence, the destruction of schools, the displacement of their families and financial constraints, though not always in quite the same way or to the same extent.

* The participant, Etigray (girl, 16), is not to be confused with the other participant, Tigray (young woman, 18)

"I am still grieving..."

Health and wellbeing

58% of girls and young women, compared to 49% of boys and young men, report continuous worrying.

The in-depth interviews reflected the emotional distress reported in the survey with many interviewees also noting that access to services, for mental health and sexual and reproductive health, were very limited, and in some places non-existent, only adding to the stress experienced. In Colombia, there can be a stigma around seeking mental health support which puts people off:

> **"When people go, they are afraid to talk about it, because they start pointing fingers. So, if they tell you, let's go to psychology, you say, that's for crazy people. Instead of making you calm down, they make you feel more fear. I want to, I feel alone, I feel bad, I need help from someone, but I don't see anyone helping me... and there are people who just want to talk to someone and that's it."** Calle, 18, Colombia

In Cameroon, there is a recognition of the emotional trauma felt by others:

> **"Some IDPs I used to discuss with tell me that they are afraid any time they hear a loud sound, they think it's a gun and some have problem sleeping because they see dead bodies and blood."** Makola, 19, Cameroon

When asked about how they were feeling what emerges from the survey is a picture of prolonged stress and turmoil, that will affect sufferers' mental and physical health well into the future[57] – further underlining the urgent need for the psychosocial support that so many interviewees have emphasised:

55%
of participants reported being unable to sleep

54%
of participants reported feeling tense and unable to relax

54%
were constantly worrying

43%
were feeling frustrated

42%
reported feeling hopeless

Participants in Ethiopia cited an overall lack of access to healthcare support, both physical and psychological, due to a scarcity of medicines and equipment, or facilities having been destroyed during the war. Some participants noted that people are dying from curable illnesses and from giving birth:

> **"Due to the poor health facilities in here we have witnessed many people are dying from illnesses that can be treated. There were even women who have died when giving birth, and it's a difficult situation."** Afambo, 15, Ethiopia

> **"Moreover, as many girls pass through circumcision in Afar, when they give birth, they experience either painful time or sometimes they die. Thus, after the child marriage, giving birth is also the biggest challenge for girls."** Addodas, 19, Ethiopia

Many interviewees felt that young people had suffered so much during the war that, for many, life was almost unbearable:

> **"Many youngsters were in depression and even some of them were in mental disorder because they lost their parents, siblings, friends or relatives. I know some others who were unable to bear the impacts of the war and dropped out of school."** Abdibora, 16, Ethiopia

Healthcare was seen as being particularly important for women and girls in the context of sexual violence: they pointed to a lack of psychological support for the many who had been raped during war, as well as follow up physical medical care, including for related pregnancies, and the lack of medicine or equipment available.

Shire discussed being unable to get any kind of medical support to help her cope with her experience of sexual violence whilst held captive by an armed group:

> **"You can't find a health service in here because they don't have the capacity at all. For instance, I frequently went to health centres to get a mental and psychological treatment, but I never had the chance to get any kind of help or treatment in these health centres. In addition, they don't have medicines and medical equipment."** Shire, 21, Ethiopia



Young girl living in a temporary shelter in Ethiopia © Plan International

Participants in the Philippines agreed that there were no support services available for those experiencing emotional trauma, you have to face your problems alone.

> **"No one [can get help when they need it]. They just face the problem head-on."** Marlam, 21, Philippines

In Colombia, interviewees were also concerned about access to health services in general though a third of participants mentioned that sexual and reproductive health and rights services were available, mainly family planning services from hospitals where you could get an IUD or condoms. Others felt services were inadequate though some reported talks at school about contraception, sexual health and relationships.

> **"Yes, that happens at school. Mainly at school. In the hospital there are campaigns and they go to the school to give talks about sex education. And in my time, they gave us condoms and taught us how to put them on."** Frijolito, 24, Colombia

The majority of participants thought the number of girls getting pregnant in the area had increased but that this was not linked to the conflict. However, the main reasons cited for the increase in pregnancies were lack of educational or economic opportunities, both of which, as is clear from the survey findings, are linked to conflict.

> **"No, I'd say mostly because of the lack of education, lack of training, but the conflict also comes in because the greater the conflict, I believe that the State as such, cannot enter a township to provide training to young people."** Calle, 21, Colombia



An 18-year-old displaced by conflict in southern Lebanon speaks to Plan International staff © Plan International

In Cameroon, unlike Colombia, most participants did attribute the rise in pregnancy rates to the conflict and to the increase in sexual violence, combined with girls being out of school, and poverty.

> **"This is because they don't go to school and they walk up and down in the community and at the end they are been deceived by either the military or the non-state armed groups, some are even raped."** Yong, 23, Cameroon

Overall, the emotional impacts of the conflict seem to fall hardest on girls and young women, exacerbated by their vulnerability to sexual violence and unintended pregnancy. Other gendered characteristics may also be at play here. Do girls and young women find it easier to admit to emotional stress, is it more acceptable for them to confess to feeling anxious, sleepless and depressed?

> **"We ourselves are too affected by stress and it gives us anxiety, it gives us headaches, it gives us everything."** Yirlesa, 18, Colombia

Table Four: **Participants experiences of emotional changes due to conflict.**

Have you experienced any of the following emotional changes in relation to your wellbeing due to the conflict that you have experienced over the past year?	Girls and young women		Boys and young men		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	**Count**	**%**
Unable to sleep	**2643**	**58.40%**	**2226**	**51.70%**	4869	55.10%
Continuous worrying	**2610**	**57.70%**	**2131**	**49.30%**	4741	53.60%
Feeling tense - being unable to relax	**2601**	**57.40%**	**2158**	**50.10%**	4759	53.80%
Frustration	**2105**	**46.50%**	**1724**	**39.90%**	3829	43.30%
Feeling hopeless	**2010**	**44.30%**	**1659**	**38.30%**	3669	41.40%
Difficulty concentrating	**1927**	**42.50%**	**1596**	**37.00%**	3523	39.80%
Feeling continuously sad	**1859**	**41.00%**	**1447**	**33.50%**	3306	37.30%
Having no motivation or interest in things	**1695**	**37.40%**	**1353**	**31.40%**	3048	34.50%
Feeling lonely	**1679**	**37.10%**	**1420**	**33.00%**	3099	35.10%
Feeling irritable	**1557**	**34.40%**	**1258**	**29.10%**	2815	31.80%
Feeling guilty	968	21.40%	809	18.70%	1777	20.10%
Having suicidal thoughts	582	12.90%	457	10.60%	1039	11.80%
Other emotional change	623	13.80%	482	11.20%	1105	12.50%
TOTAL	**4511**	**100.00%**	**4302**	**100.00%**	**8813**	**100.00%**

Significant gendered impacts

Girls and young women report their wellbeing is significantly more affected than boys and young men.



12-year-old who fled conflict in Khartoum, Sudan, with her family © Plan International

"We are struggling..."

Livelihoods and economic security

In the chaos of fleeing their homes and the overall destruction that armed conflict brings with it most family incomes are bound to be affected. Farms cannot be worked and other supplies fail to get through to affected areas. The resulting food shortages mean that not only do people go hungry but whole economies shrink – there is nothing to sell and nothing to buy, even if you have the money.

The survey participants confirm this: over 63 per cent of them reported their ability to earn a living and their household income being moderately, very or extremely affected by conflict. Incomes have been most affected in Sudan and least in the Philippines.

When asked about the different strategies they used to cope with not being able to meet basic needs, most stated:

45%
relying on less nutritious foods

45.5%
spending their savings

45.5%
reducing the amount of food they eat

There were significant gender differences for relying on less nutritious foods and reducing the amount of food they eat, with more girls and young women reporting that they are eating less.

47% of girls and young women compared to 44% of boys and young men had less food to eat.

This finding is in line with other research: in many countries, two out of three girls and women eat last and least and, of the 309 million people in the world who are extremely hungry, 60 per cent are women and girls.[58] This reduction in food intake and increased reliance on less nutritious food, which affects girls and young women significantly more, is a worrying finding. Pregnant young women are especially vulnerable, as is their unborn child.

In the in-depth interviews the struggle for economic survival was vividly described. In Cameroon interviewees had had places of business burnt down and both girls and boys were working at whatever jobs they could find to support the family income. Girls and women were mainly seen to engage in farming, where they could, and selling food. Boys and men were also said to farm but were thought to engage more in odd jobs and were described as "protectors" and "providers" for their family. Many interviewees discussed having previously relied on local farming for their food, which was no longer possible:

> **"People cannot go to the farm again because of fear... people's shops have been burnt and a lot of people have run away."** Bate, 22, Cameroon

In Colombia it was displaced families who were most affected by the loss of family income and often forced to rely on remittances from relatives. Some interviewees reported an increase in domestic responsibilities, but for all of them, not just girls and young women.

> **"Regardless of the fact that you are a man you have to learn how to do things... in my house we were always taught that we all had a responsibility, one swept, another mopped, another helped in the kitchen, and so on."** Daniel, 19, Colombia

Interviewees in Ethiopia talked about the cost of living which had soared due to the conflict:

> **"Before the war, the cost of living was good because goods were cheap. After the cost of living becomes too much expensive, people are suffering from gastrointestinal and mental problems… Some days there will be water, but if not, I send my son after school to bring water from far away."** Adolay, 20, Ethiopia

One young woman, Awash, 22, explained the food shortages on that fact that farmers are unable to move freely and work and many young men who would harvest crops have been killed. Additionally, bank accounts are inaccessible and the salaries of those in work are paid intermittently:

> **"We are in a difficult living situation at the moment because we are not given our salary every month, we are getting it once in three months… On the other hand, basic items like teff* and other food items have become expensive, and as a result we are living in difficult situation. It becomes impossible to survive…"** Addodas, 19, Ethiopia

Several of the female interviewees felt that their unpaid care work had increased:

> **"Compared to boys, we spend most of our time working in the house. This means there is a lot of burden on girls."** Dansha, 17, Ethiopia

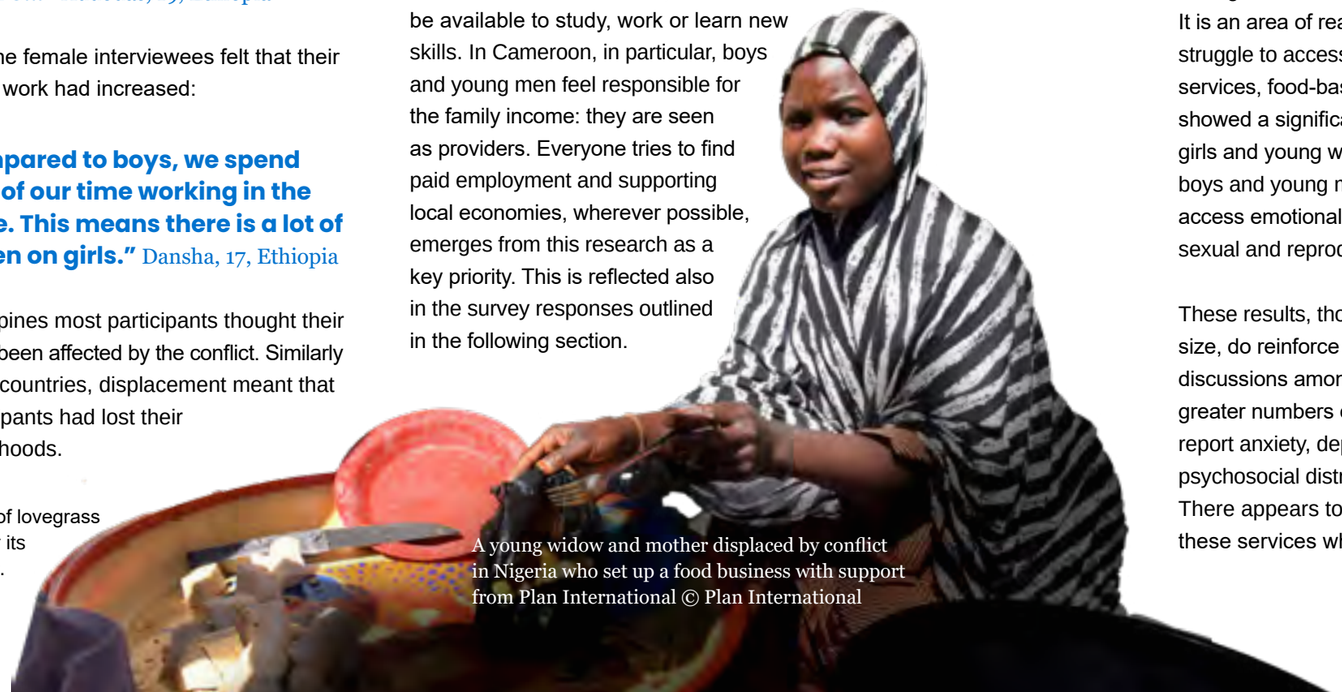
In the Philippines most participants thought their income had been affected by the conflict. Similarly to the other countries, displacement meant that many participants had lost their land or livelihoods.

> **"Because before, when there were no shootings yet, my father had a farm, and when the conflict started, he left it behind. That was his source of income."** Rania, 21, Philippines

Domestic responsibilities had increased due to the conflict, largely because interviewees spent more time at home. By and large, work in the home was mainly female:

> **"Women in this area even at young age are married so their responsibility is taking care of children and the whole family in war times."** Mariam, 21, Philippines

Boys and men were seen as responsible for activities outside the home that contributed to providing for their families, mainly through farming and harvesting. However, some participants noted these responsibilities could overlap and that girls also help to harvest, and boys can do household chores. Location, including displacement, pre-conflict status and gender all have different effects on how individuals and families cope with increasing poverty. Girls and young women eat less, and in many places seem more bound by domestic responsibilities which reduces their access to any opportunities that might be available to study, work or learn new skills. In Cameroon, in particular, boys and young men feel responsible for the family income: they are seen as providers. Everyone tries to find paid employment and supporting local economies, wherever possible, emerges from this research as a key priority. This is reflected also in the survey responses outlined in the following section.



A young widow and mother displaced by conflict in Nigeria who set up a food business with support from Plan International © Plan International

* A species of lovegrass cultivated for its edible seeds.

"it is not enough…"

Access to services and resources

When participants were asked what services or resources, they wanted to access but were unable to, due to the conflict, the most frequent responses were:

47% financial support

39% employment assistance

37% education

33% food

32% healthcare/ medical treatment

Financial support and employment assistance emerged as the most important issues for everyone. It is an area of real need which young people struggle to access. Out of the most reported services, food-based aid was the only one that showed a significant gender difference. Additionally, girls and young women, in greater numbers than boys and young men, reported being unable to access emotional and social wellbeing services and sexual and reproductive health services.

These results, though based on a small sample size, do reinforce previous survey findings, and discussions amongst our interviewees, where greater numbers of girls and young women report anxiety, depression and both physical and psychosocial distress resulting from sexual violence. There appears to be a real and unmet need for these services which girls and young women, in particular, are articulating. When asked what they considered their localities needed most, survey participants selected ensuring food security and access to basic needs but there were significant gender differences in other priorities.

Boys and young men emphasised rebuilding infrastructure and enhancing security and law enforcement significantly more than girls and young women, while the latter selected 'providing emotional and social wellbeing support and counselling,' for example, mental health or psychosocial support, and supporting vulnerable populations, more than boys and young men.

In the in-depth interviews, particularly in Cameroon, interviewees discussed access to medicines and healthcare as a major challenge:

> **"There was one day my sister was sick and we could not take her to the hospital because it was not secured on the streets. My father had to carry her to a local drug vendor's house for help."** Makola, 19, Cameroon

Compared to participants who identified as IDPs and those who remained at home during the conflict, refugee participants were more likely to prioritise access to food and basic necessities while participants who remained at home were more likely to select fostering economic recovery.

Findings in this section clearly demonstrate the need for targeted provision according to population and location. Access to food aid is more fraught for young women and this needs to be remedied while their mental health issues need greater attention. Refugees, though willing to work and support themselves, are largely dependent on others so food security, basic needs and infrastructure are crucial – for those still living at home rebuilding their local economy is key.

Table Five: **Resources or services participants were unable to access due to conflict, by gender**

Are there any resources or services that you wanted to access but were unable to due to the conflict?	Girls and young women		Boys and young men		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	**Count**	**%**
Financial support [e.g. cash assistance]	2307	47.30%	2262	46.70%	**4569**	**47.00%**
Employment assistance [including job trainings/skills-trainings/job placement services/entrepreneurship trainings. etc.]	1891	38.80%	1874	38.70%	**3765**	**38.70%**
Education	1825	37.50%	1748	36.10%	**3573**	**36.80%**
Food	**1633**	**33.50%**	**1588**	**32.80%**	3221	33.10%
Healthcare/medical treatment	1581	32.40%	1536	31.70%	**3117**	**32.10%**
Food-based aid [including cash transfers/vouchers. etc.]	1558	32.00%	1437	29.60%	**2995**	**30.80%**
Emotional and social wellbeing services [e.g. mental health/ psychosocial support services. etc.]	1341	27.50%	1179	24.30%	**2520**	**25.90%**
Transportation	1411	29.00%	1423	29.40%	**2834**	**29.20%**
Safe access to water	1238	25.40%	1152	23.80%	**2390**	**24.60%**
Security or protection services	1119	23.00%	1077	22.20%	**2196**	**22.60%**
Clothing	1045	21.40%	964	19.90%	**2009**	**20.70%**
Items for the home [furniture/kitchen equipment. etc.]	936	19.20%	838	17.30%	**1774**	**18.30%**
Legal services and aid [immigration/ refugee status assistance/other]	864	17.70%	844	17.40%	**1708**	**17.60%**
Sanitation [access to facilities]	823	16.90%	713	14.70%	**1536**	**15.80%**
Sexual and reproductive health services	679	13.90%	579	11.90%	**1258**	**12.90%**
You were able to access the services or resources you needed to	255	5.20%	235	4.80%	**490**	**5.00%**
None of the above	598	12.30%	628	13.00%	**1226**	**12.60%**
Total	**4873**	**100.00%**	**4847**	**100.00%**	**9720**	**100.00%**

Significant gendered impacts

Girls and young women reported greater difficulty accessing food-based aid than boys and young men.

"Whenever [aid] comes, it's always of great need"

The role of aid agencies

As well as detailed questions about their overall access to services and resources, survey respondents were also asked about whether they had received assistance from any aid organisations and, if so, was it helpful? It emerged that although too few of them reported having access to aid, those that did found it effective.

These findings cannot suggest the causes of why aid is not reaching civilians in need despite the best efforts of aid agencies. Yet, they point to an urgent need for unhindered humanitarian access, so that aid can reach civilians in need, an obligation under international humanitarian law.

In many complex conflict situations aid struggles to get through. Lorries wait on borders, civilians are blocked from aid by armed groups or unnecessary bureaucratic restrictions inside countries, and humanitarian staff are targeted and sometimes killed.

When aid can get through 81% of survey respondents find it either somewhat or extremely helpful.

46% of participants reported **not having received any aid.**

Those who had found it somewhat helpful, 45 %, and extremely helpful, 36%.

Participants who identified as **IDPs and refugees found it more helpful than those living at home.**

Participants from the Philippines found the aid they received the most helpful**.**



Plan staff load relief aid into car for delivery to displaced families in Lebanon © Plan International

In all four countries interviewees reported some access to aid, but necessities like food and water were often scarce. Participants from Ethiopia discussed the consequences of this, "there were people who died of hunger and thirst," both in the context of fleeing and when arriving in host communities.

> **"After we get here there are so many problems there is no water and other necessities, even we don't have a bucket for water, and we have to fetch the water from the river."** Bagado, 17, Ethiopia

Despite this urgent need for assistance, many in Ethiopia felt that, by and large, it was not forthcoming:

> **"There are no organisations to help us, no NGOs. Our brother was fetching us water from far. We helped tired people to take rest under a shade. Once, we slaughtered a goat and cooked the meat on a wooden fire. We only ate that, nothing else."** Aculle, 18, Ethiopia

Pregnant or nursing women are particularly vulnerable, as described by Addodas:

> **"We were suffering from hunger and thirst and as a result, breastfeeding has been the most difficult job because unless we eat well the children were not able to feed."** Addodas, 19, Ethiopia

> **"I always thought that it is better to die at home than suffering like this... My child's health problem got complicated after I took him with me on the difficult journey of fleeing the war. He mostly cries, he lost weight because he was malnourished, and his behaviour totally changed."** Addodas, 19, Ethiopia

In Cameroon, aid in various forms was getting through:

> **"Including food, water, shelter, medical supplies, clothing, and other essentials needed for survival and recovery."** Egbe, 16, Cameroon

But interviewees said it was intermittent, and often too little, too late. Participants want to see aid organisations make greater efforts to really listen to the needs of the people.

> **"We ask the government and NGOs to come and talk to us physically, but most of the time they meet and discuss with officials or representatives. They have never come to meet us or discuss with us. At the moment we are receiving aid and support from different bodies, however, it is not enough compared to the number of people."** Tezeke, 16, Ethiopia



Young woman in Ethiopia © Plan International

"I see myself as a successful person..."

Looking ahead

Ending the conflict and the violence that so many children and young people have been living with was the main concern when the research participants looked to the future.

In many cases, though not all, their ambitions – of becoming doctors, professional athletes, teachers, lawyers, accountants – remain intact but they are dependent on an end to conflict and lasting peace.

The peacebuilding actions prioritised were:

63% peace talks

59% ceasefire

49% conflict prevention efforts to stop further hostilities

Table Six: Participants' suggestions for peacebuilding actions, by gender

What peacebuilding actions do you believe should happen in your country or region to help end the conflict?	Girls and young women		Boys and young men		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	**Count**	**%**
Peace talks	3136	64.50%	2983	61.50%	**6119**	**63.00%**
Ceasefire [an agreed stop in the fighting]	2936	60.40%	2758	56.90%	**5694**	**58.60%**
Conflict prevention efforts to prevent future conflict	2478	51.00%	2256	46.50%	**4734**	**48.70%**
Addressing the root causes of the conflict [why the conflict started]	2214	45.60%	2098	43.20%	**4312**	**44.40%**
Involve youth in communities/ including those who are displaced/in peace talks	**2168**	**44.60%**	**1914**	**39.50%**	4082	42.00%
Community peacebuilding efforts	2162	44.50%	2041	42.10%	**4203**	**43.30%**
Involve adults in communities/including those who are displaced/in peace talks	2080	42.80%	1805	37.20%	**3885**	**40.00%**
Involve girls and young women/including those who are displaced/in peace talks	1894	39.00%	1602	33.00%	**3496**	**36.00%**
None of the above	163	3.40%	238	4.90%	**401**	**4.10%**
Total	**4860**	**100.00%**	**4851**	**100.00%**	**9711**	**100.00%**

Significant gendered impacts

Girls and young women voted in larger numbers for most of the peacebuilding activities listed and were also significantly more in favour of involving young people in peace talks.

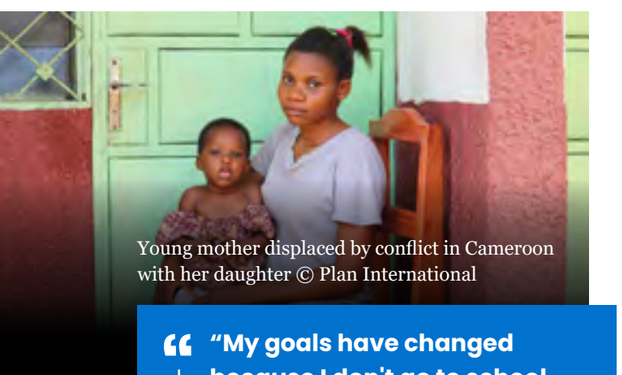
Ana, in Colombia, is involved with an association which works with victims on building peace, trying to make sure that past experiences are not allowed to dominate future lives.

> **"We are trying to ensure that those of us who have been victims do not have our rights violated more than we have."**
> Ana, 24, Colombia

Those taking part in the in-depth interviews were asked to reflect on where they saw themselves in 5-10 years and what the future they envisioned looked like.

In Cameroon, where many were despondent about the future, participants talked about what they wanted to be in the past tense as if it was no longer possible. Many confirmed their goals had to change due to the ongoing conflict.

> **"I was forced to stop school in form two, I wanted to be a pilot of a plane, but here I am working "bambe" [labourer] at a construction site. I now mix cement and carry blocks and cement. My dreams have failed me because of this conflict."**
> Bate, 22, Cameroon



Young mother displaced by conflict in Cameroon with her daughter © Plan International

> **"My goals have changed because I don't go to school again because of my child, and I can't tell what tomorrow will look like."** Yisah, 17, Cameroon

In the three other focus countries – Colombia, Ethiopia and the Philippines – interviewees were trying to hold onto their hopes and dreams.

In the Philippines, the majority said that the conflict had not changed their goals, even when their circumstances were radically different, and all those out of school were determined to return:

> **"My dream remains the same [to finish my studies] even before I got married. Because I only got married during a time when my parents were struggling financially, and my sibling who is abroad advised me to take advantage of the opportunity while they're still abroad because if I wait longer, there might not be anyone else abroad to help financially."**
> Mahid, 18, Philippines



Temporary learning centres are helping children continue their education in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique © Plan International

In Colombia many interviewees could see ahead to a life of professional and personal success:

> **"Living alone or with my partner, being already a professional, having a car, helping my mom to stop working."** Tori, 18, Colombia

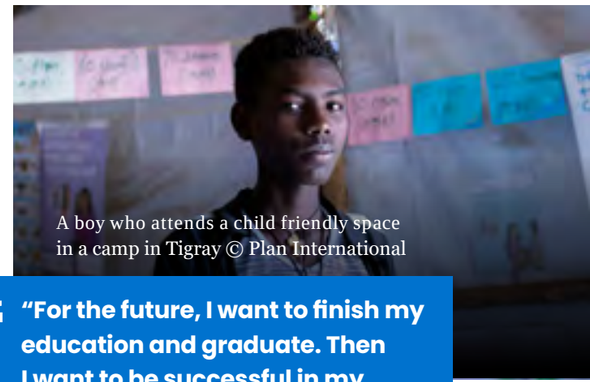
However, a considerable number, a quarter of participants, thought their ambitions had been affected by the conflict. Often causing them to drop out of education and defer their dreams, with some mentioning that their mental health has been affected. Others could see that having to find a new direction was not entirely negative:

> **"I do feel that perhaps the factor of displacement leads us to rethink many things in the family, to look at other perspectives of life, to look at other economic alternatives and all this, but we did suffer a lot at the time."** Daniel, 19, Colombia

Some interviewees imagined different futures for the towns they lived in: places of peace and tranquillity with more education and employment opportunities for young people.

In their discussions about the future and their personal goals, participants in Ethiopia talked about the importance of peace, of returning to education, being reunited with families, going home, and realising their career goals.

> **"If the peace continued like this for the future, I believe we can work and lead our normal life as usual... war has got no value except destruction and suffering... so peace is the greatest thing in the world, and I want to say let us preserve it together."**
> Addi, 23, Ethiopia



A boy who attends a child friendly space in a camp in Tigray © Plan International

> **"For the future, I want to finish my education and graduate. Then I want to be successful in my career and help my families and the society."** Baraulo, 20, Ethiopia

Many remained ambitious, still hoping to become doctors, teachers, engineers, a pilot, a beautician or work in finance. Peace and reconciliation were often described as the necessary foundation for returning to their normal lives – only then could they settle in a stable society which would enable them to go back into education and provide career opportunities.

> **"Reconciliation will bring happiness and unity, but if we failed to do that nothing will get improved."** Adola, 16, Ethiopia



Girl in school at a refugee camp in Cameroon © Plan International

Participants in Ethiopia were particularly concerned with the effect of the conflict on girls and young women in relation to sexual violence.

> **"I had a dream that one day I would marry and make my parents proud, but now I am raising a child whom I didn't know even the father. I also dreamed of finishing my education and after I graduate from a university, I want to get a job and lead a successful life. However, right now all those dreams are crippled..."** Tigray, 18, Ethiopia

Mille, 13, and Aculle, 18, expressed the hope that in the future girls and women will receive additional help and protection. Both are determined to raise awareness of girls' and young women's rights.

> **"I think as girls suffer from a lot of hardships they must be supported and their rights must be respected... I want to work on raising awareness about gender equality because I have witnessed a girl who got raped.... For those girls I want to teach them the value of getting into court legal process or women affairs offices. I also believe people who have participated in such cases must be held accountable for their action so that others learn from them."** Mille, 13, Ethiopia

Aculle believes safeguarding women and girls from abuse should be a top priority: people should be educated about protecting women, it is everybody's responsibility.

> **"In the future, I want to study in the areas of health and work on things related with women. From now on, other girls and women should not face what we faced. What we had been through was really very difficult."** Aculle, 18, Ethiopia

Interviewees from all four countries discussed how to end the conflict and build a lasting peace. Their suggestions are very much in line with reactions from the survey respondents. Dialogue between the warring parties was seen as crucial:

> **"The two parties should sit and dialogue for peace to return back to our region we have suffered a lot."** Nain, 15, Cameroon

In Colombia, however, interviewees had mixed feelings, and some scepticism, about peace talks:

> **"The truth is a little difficult...They say we are going to make a peace agreement, and in that peace agreement, they always disagree on something, and that generates more war. It always ends up the same."** Raquel, 22, Colombia

Many participants felt strongly that young people should be involved:

> **"Yes ohh!!! Because tomorrow is in their hands and they are the leaders."** Yisah, 17, Cameroon

Daniel in Colombia saw a key role for young people at municipal and community level, using their interests and abilities:

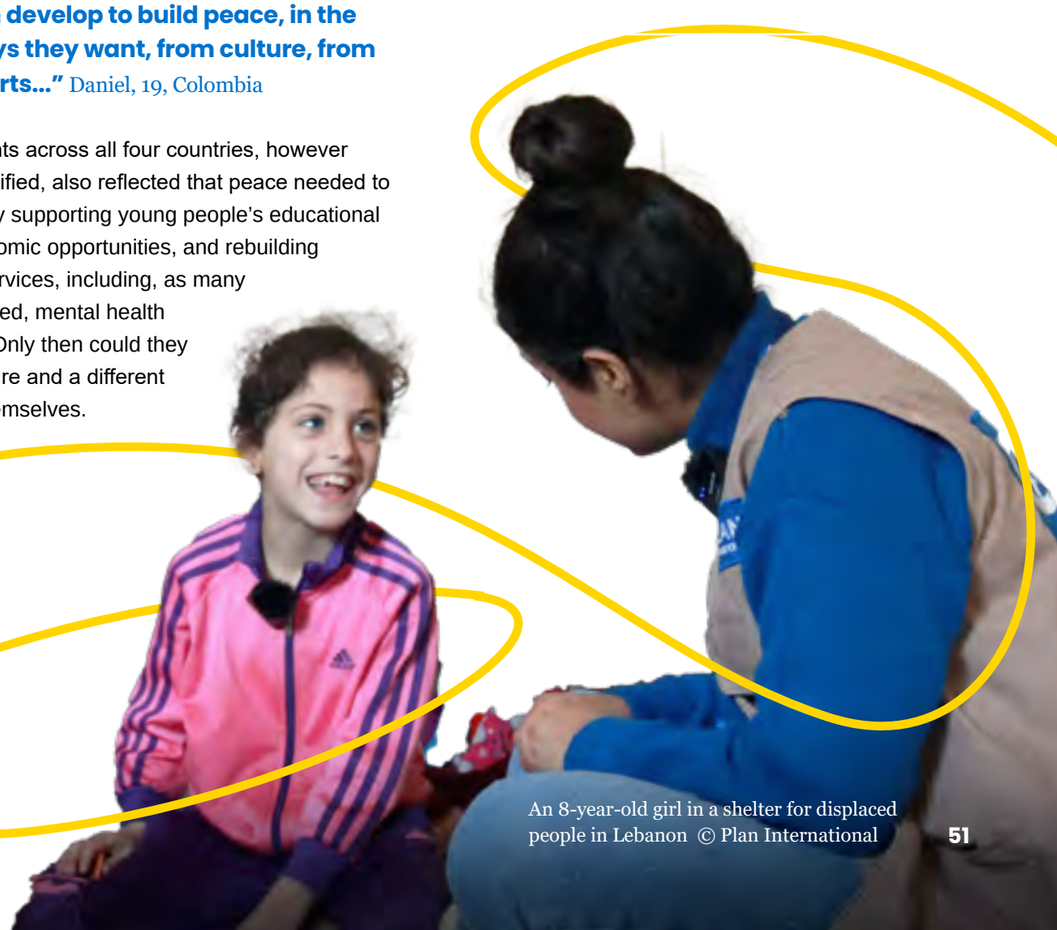
> **"But I believe that peace can also be built from the youth sector in the area of political and social advocacy, citizen activism and that kind of thing. But I think that we also have to train young people in rights, advocacy mechanisms, citizen oversight, in self-protection mechanisms, but also in some way or another... those small initiatives that young people themselves can develop to build peace, in the ways they want, from culture, from sports..."** Daniel, 19, Colombia

Participants across all four countries, however they identified, also reflected that peace needed to be built by supporting young people's educational and economic opportunities, and rebuilding crucial services, including, as many emphasised, mental health support. Only then could they see a future and a different life for themselves.

Conflict resolution needs to be followed up by concrete action to rebuild lives - from governments, international agencies and involving young people themselves.

> **"I want to stress that our home doesn't have anything, I went there one time after the war and our home is totally destroyed. Hence, what I can say is that we want to get back home with electricity and water services resumed."** Tsebri, 18, Ethiopia

> **"Because there are people who have lived it in their town, they know what the conflict is and they can provide a different perspective to the older people or to those who are not involved."** Valentina, 22, Colombia



An 8-year-old girl in a shelter for displaced people in Lebanon © Plan International

Conclusion

The research demonstrates clearly, often in graphic detail, the devastating effects of living with armed conflict and violence.

Conflict kills, it leaves permanent scars on many who survive, it blights childhoods. Young people describe having to live with unimaginable fear. Their parents are killed in front of them, they flee their homes, armed gangs control the streets, girls and young women are raped and abused, young men are coerced into fighting: though boys too are abused and young women fight.

Violence is normalised – you can't go out, or go to school, job opportunities disappear, poverty and hunger drive yet more violence and increasingly harmful coping strategies.

Dreams dwindle. Young men may turn to armed groups for money and protection; children may be forcibly recruited, abducted or become victims of other grave violations; girls can be coerced into child marriage to support themselves and their families.

> **"But now I am the one who has to look for what we have to eat and take care of the home, and this is not easy for me... I have to look after myself and now I got pregnant because I was forced to get a man to look after me."** Bessong, 24, Cameroon

Girls' and young people's lives are clearly shaped by the crisis in their countries. The violence leaves physical and psychological marks: the effects of the lack of education and of health services, the scarcity of food and water, the lack of skills training and often no safe way of earning a living, will follow all those who survive into their future. The research also shows clear differences in the experiences of girls and boys, young women and young men and in their reactions to these experiences.

Unsurprisingly the research survey reveals high levels of emotional distress: including sleep disturbances and constant worrying, alongside limited access to the mental health and sexual and reproductive health and rights services that might help; with girls and young women reporting more indicators of emotional distress than their male counterparts. Education is disrupted. In this case boys and young men report being more affected than girls and young women.



Cameroon: A mother and her children in a refugee camp where they have all been able to access education © Plan International



A school housing families displaced by conflict in Lebanon © Plan International

> **"Our education that we spent all our valuable time and life become meaningless..."** Adoeio, 24, Ethiopia

Makola's experience emphasises the effect of intersecting vulnerabilities: family incomes drop, school journeys are unsafe and he is a wheelchair user.

> **"My school was far away, and I could not use only my wheelchair to go, so I had to pay for extra transport. This was expensive for my parents. I could not also continue school during this crisis because it was very insecure for me going to and from school due to gunshots at times and I could not run like the others, so I was forced to stay home most of the time."** Makola, 19, Cameroon

In the in-depth interviews many reflected on the numbers of young men who had been killed, how they were targeted for recruitment and turned to the armed groups as a last resort.

> **"I believe no one loves war unless they were run out of options. Thus, when someone sees women being raped, his sisters being raped, his mother being raped, his parents being killed and finally for his own safety he joined the struggle... it is not about a war being heaven."** Mekelle, 18, Ethiopia

Girls and young women, though less likely to be recruited into armed groups, were subjected to unremitting sexual violence, including rape, which often resulted in pregnancy.

Young women talked about the stigma of this continuing when they returned home with their children. It was also clear how vulnerable pregnant women are during conflict: lack of food, and medical help and having to flee their homes meant that both mothers and babies died.



Young woman who is participating in a conflict resolution programme in the Philippines © Plan International / Michael Perfecto



Children living in a centre for internally displaced families in Ukraine © Plan International / Albina Vinar

And still, despite all they have been through, young people hang on to their dreams: dreams of furthering their education, finding jobs, building relationships, and contributing to their societies' future.

> **"I see myself as a successful person... To have my own home, my family, my personal things and that. To have a studio. Improve myself. And to have my own business."** Andrés, 21, Colombia

> **"I want to go back to school to broaden my knowledge about what's happening outside [in the world]. To learn [more] as well."** Fatima, 15, Philippines

For this optimism to be justified, peace must be prioritised. Both boys and young men and girls and young women, though the latter in greater numbers, feel that the young need to be part of any peace-building agenda.

Girls and boys, young women and young men, despite many needs in common, experience the conflict in different ways and these experiences will continue to reverberate throughout their lives.

> **"Peace is the primary important thing in life because everything thrives only if there is peace."** Korem, 18, Ethiopia

The research reflects both what young people living in conflict-affected areas, however they identify and wherever they are from, have in common and where differences need to be understood.

Ensuring food security and access to basic necessities is of prime importance to everyone as is fostering employment opportunities and building economic security.

Accessing health services and nutritional needs are prioritised more by girls and young women while boys and young men are more concerned about repairing infrastructure and enhancing security.

All these things are important but the different priorities need to be understood and planned for. Aid is not always reaching those who need it most when they most need it.

This report has looked particularly at gendered differences in both the experiences and responses of girls and boys, young men and young women – not that one suffers more than the other but they suffer differently. Findings from the research also emphasise that they need different forms of support both during conflict and as societies start to rebuild post-conflict. These differences are important and need to be understood, both to support peacebuilding and to make sure that aid is targeted and effective.

As their societies emerge from conflict, and as they live through it, young people have a lot to offer. War can blight an entire generation but it is the experience and energy of this generation, if they are properly supported, that will help their communities survive and rebuild.

> **"What was my dream? I wanted to finish my studies. As for me, I didn't want to get married early because I was still young, and even if I'm of age, I still don't want to get married. What I want is to first help my mother and raise my siblings. I want to help them study and support them. That's what I want, to help them."** Dalia, 14, Philippines



Women in a camp for internally displaced people in Nigeria © Plan International



23 year-old refugee from Sudan waiting at a transit centre in South Sudan © Plan International / Peter Caton

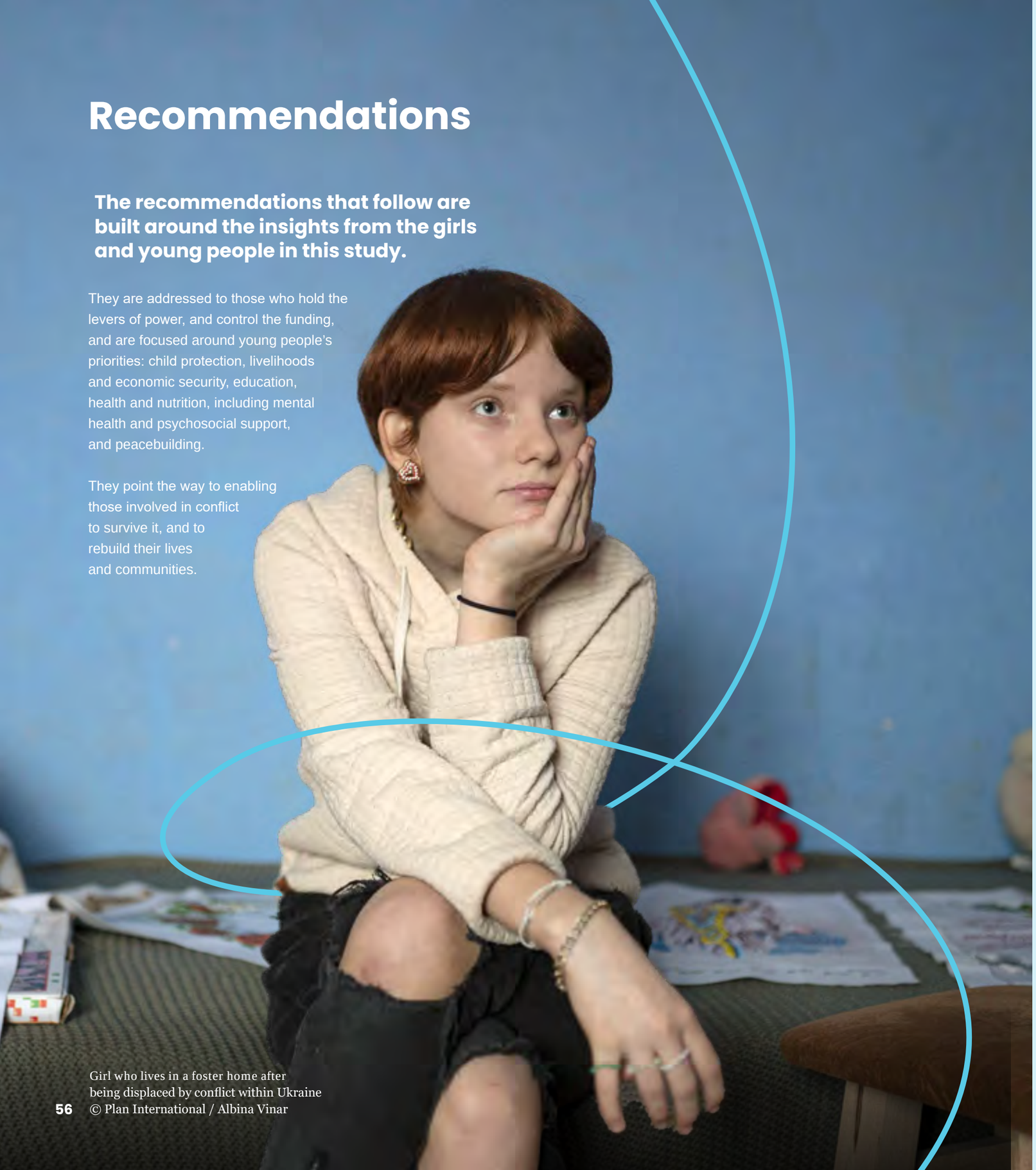
Many of the young people mentioned the importance of financial support, not just for education, but rebuilding the economy and creating job opportunities which would divert many young people away from the need to join gangs, marry as children, or engage in illegal activities just to survive.

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are built around the insights from the girls and young people in this study.

They are addressed to those who hold the levers of power, and control the funding, and are focused around young people's priorities: child protection, livelihoods and economic security, education, health and nutrition, including mental health and psychosocial support, and peacebuilding.

They point the way to enabling those involved in conflict to survive it, and to rebuild their lives and communities.



Girl who lives in a foster home after being displaced by conflict within Ukraine
© Plan International / Albina Vinar

Parties in conflict, including armed forces and non-state armed groups must:

Protect Children and Civilians

Stop targeting, killing, and abusing children and civilians. End all grave violations against children: recruitment and use, killing and maiming, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, abductions, and denial of humanitarian access. Recognise and release children recruited by armed forces and groups to child protection actors for care and rehabilitation.

Respect International Humanitarian Law

Ensure civilians in need receive humanitarian assistance and protection without obstruction. Adhere to International Humanitarian Law and protect aid workers and guarantee rapid access to those in need.

Achieve Ceasefires and Peace

Implement immediate and sustained ceasefires. Commence meaningful peace talks aimed at lasting peace. Prioritise ending child recruitment and their use in negotiations.

To the UN Security Council and all member states:

General

Unequivocally condemn all violations and abuses against civilians, especially children. Demand implementation and development of children and armed conflict action plans, ensuring accountability for violators. Urge immediate measures to end sexual and gender-based violence in conflicts. Encourage inclusive dialogues for peace, addressing root causes to ensure dignity, education, and livelihoods for all.

The humanitarian sector must:



General

Provide emergency relief and essential services for children, including food, water, shelter, health, education, and psychosocial support. Assist hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied children and those who survived abuse and young mothers, with dignity. Include children and young people, especially girls and young women, in peacebuilding, negotiations and humanitarian efforts.



Child protection

Ensure that the protection of children is a strategic objective and collective outcome in humanitarian responses, under the Centrality of Protection. Prioritise the prevention of and response to conflict-related child protection risks, in particular child recruitment and sexual and gender-based violence. Advocate for child and adolescent girl-responsive case management. Mental health and psychosocial support services and holistic reintegration support as part of the minimum service package.



Education

Prioritise conflict-sensitive and gender-responsive education during crises. Advocate for the Safe School Declaration to protect education from attacks. Provide flexible, non-formal education for out-of-school adolescents and youth, internally displaced persons, refugees, and vulnerable groups. Ensure safety and wellbeing of learners and teachers including through the provision of safe transportation to and from school, psychosocial support and school meals.



Health, nutrition and psychosocial assistance

Provide mobile health and nutrition services, including primary care, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Mental Health and Psychosocial support, in underserved areas. Prioritise malnutrition prevention activities and severe acute malnutrition treatment for children under five, pregnant and breastfeeding girls and women. Ensure consistent nutrition supplies for 6-12 months in conflict zones and camps for refugees and internally displaced persons.



Cash and voucher assistance / food security / livelihoods

Use cash and voucher assistance strategically in multi-sector response plans to address the food insecurity and economic drivers of child protection risks, such as children associated with armed forces and armed groups and sexual and gender based violence against children and young people.

To national governments and local governments:



Access

Adhere to International Humanitarian Law. Promote national legal mechanisms and policies to ensure conflict-affected people have access to appropriate and timely humanitarian assistance and essential services. Allow the unimpeded movement of humanitarian workers and aid. Address mobility barriers and restrictions for children with special needs, girls, differently abled, and transgender children and young people.



Child Protection

Collaborate with humanitarian actors and support efforts to prevent, protect, report and respond to the six grave violations against children. Protect children and civilians from sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by state actors (including police and military forces), with specific attention to risks girls and young women face. Incorporate protocols, policies, and legislation and allocate funds available to prevent sexual and gender based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse. Enable legal and judicial action.



Education

Prioritise certified education including accelerated education, secondary education and vocational training pathways for conflict-affected adolescents and young people. Ensure access without barriers. Develop national policies to protect education from attack, incorporating peace education to promote social cohesion and resilience. Enable displaced children and young people to continue their education to build a better future.



Health, nutrition and psychosocial support services

Scale up primary health, nutrition, sexual and reproductive health and mental health and psychosocial support for children and young people, with specific attention to adolescent girls and young women. Use mobile teams for hard-to-reach areas. Prioritise funding for nutrition, health system strengthening, training, safe passage, and integrating age-specific and gender equality initiatives.



Cash and voucher assistance / food security / livelihoods

Use cash and voucher assistance in integrated programmes of child protection, education, food security, nutrition, livelihood and social safety nets to meet the priority needs of children and young people. Prioritise girls and women. Promote and protect the local food and nutrition supply chain and local food producers to ensure that humanitarian aid is delivered in a timely and cost-effective way.

To donors:

Education

Recognise education as vital during conflict. Make funding available to meet the Global Education First Initiative target of four per cent of humanitarian aid. Allocate sufficient funding for adolescents and young people's education, for the implementation of the Safe School Declaration and measures to protect education from attack.Prioritise education in peace and reconciliation efforts. Support conflict-sensitive investments that promote gender equality, social cohesion, peace, and tolerance.

Child protection

Fund flexible, multi-year programmes that use gender- and age-responsive strategies to prevent and respond to child protection risks worsened by conflict, including child recruitment and sexual and gender-based violence. Fund setting up accountability mechanisms focusing on crimes against children, child rights violations, and the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on children in armed conflict.

Cash and voucher assistance / food security / livelihoods

Provide flexible funding for programmes that support the economic stability and recovery of children, young people and their families, with specific attention to girls and young women. Increase food security funding to prevent hunger, build resilience, and support child-focused and adolescent well-being in food-insecure areas. Invest in locally tailored research and innovation for greater impact.

Health, nutrition and psychosocial support services

Fund emergency health care and psychosocial support, prioritising women staff recruitment. Provide flexible funding for universal health access and quick response to health crises. invest in local health systems, infrastructure, and crisis response training. fund gender-sensitive nutrition initiatives maternal, infant and young children nutrition in emergency and integrate them with cash assistance and social protection programmes.

Woman who was separated from her children in Sudan by the conflict and became a refugee
© Plan International / Peter Caton

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Girls carry chairs to temporary learning space set up at their school in Mozambique © Plan International

Until we are all equal

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we 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 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

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