

Because I am a Girl: State of the World's Girls 2008

Executive Summary



Special focus: In the Shadow of War

"This is a welcome and timely report as it sheds an important and critical light on the often-overlooked plight of girls in conflict and post-conflict countries where the environments are rife with hostile conditions that threaten their survival and potential. Urgent intervention is required to give girls a chance to lead normal lives that include obtaining an education and access to health care." Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia



"To discriminate against girls is not only morally indefensible, it is also economically, politically and socially unsupportable. Nowhere is this more crucial than in societies that are unstable or in countries that are emerging from conflict, where to ignore a substantial proportion of the population makes little sense." Graça Machel

'Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2008' is the second in a series of eight reports published by Plan examining the rights of girls throughout their childhood, adolescence and as young women. The series will be produced annually in the run up to 2015, the target year for the Millennium Development Goals.

The 2008 report, subtitled 'In the Shadow of War', examines the state of girls in conflict situations around the world and looks at what happens to them before, during and after war is over. It makes recommendations for change at international, national and local levels. It is aimed at all those who have a duty of care for young women – particularly those in power who have the responsibility to ensure that girls survive, are protected, can realise their potential, and are able to participate in decisions made about their lives. Nearly every country in the world has agreed that girls should have these rights by ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child and yet they continue to be ignored and deprived of their rights on a daily basis, especially, but not only, in conflict situations.

The report is organised in two sections – the first is a comprehensive overview of data and an analysis of why and how girls experience conflict in particular ways due to their age and sex. It includes the voices of many girls. The second section monitors global statistics to see how girls are faring. As well as focusing on a different topic each time, the reports follow a group of 135 girls born in 2007, in different parts of the world, to see how their lives are affected by being young and female.

Key facts: Girls and Conflict

There are few statistics specifically related to girls and young women caught up in armed conflict, but we do know that:

- 200 million girls in countries that are at risk of, in the midst of or emerging from armed conflict.
- There are about 100,000 girls among the estimated 300,000 child soldiers in the world today. From 1990 to 2003, girls were part of government, militia, paramilitary and/or armed opposition forces in 55 countries, and were involved in armed conflict in 38 of these.
- In the past decade, over two million children were killed during wartime, while six million were injured and more than one million were orphaned or separated from their families.
- More than half of the 39 million children out of school live in countries affected by conflict are girls. Although the number of children out of school is falling, a disproportionate number of girls remain unable to attend school.
- Thousands of girls and young women – no-one knows exactly how many – have suffered rape and sexual abuse in times of war. Today, rape is used as a deliberate tactic in ethnic or religious conflict.
- At the end of 2006, there were 32.9 million refugees and internally displaced people in the world; a large percentage of these were women and children.

The context: In the Shadow of War

Think about war and you probably think of men with guns, tanks and fighting. You may recall television pictures of rows of tents housing bedraggled refugees. The last thing likely to come to mind is the image of a young woman. And yet, whether as civilians or soldiers, young women play a key role in times of conflict.

Young people as a group, both boys and girls, are seriously affected by war due to sheer numbers: they make up the majority of those living in countries where there is conflict. Because they are young, they suffer from the impact of war but are even less likely than adults to have any control over what happens to them.

As this 17-year-old girl in Ghana noted: ‘Children do not start wars. Yet they are most vulnerable to its deadly effects. Millions of innocent children die in conflicts, which is no fault of theirs, just because some greedy leaders rob powers with the barrel of the gun. During such times everything freezes, no education, no drinking water, no electricity, food shortages, no shelter, and most of all some girls are raped leading to HIV/ AIDS.’

This report uses five ‘lenses’ to examine the impact of conflict on girls. Each lens is explored to varying degrees within each chapter.

1. **Participation and empowerment** – fragility and conflict affect opportunities for girls’ participation and empowerment – both positively and negatively.
2. **Security and protection** – girls and young women are amongst the most vulnerable when security breaks down and different forms of violence are conducted against them with impunity.
3. **Access to basic services** – the breakdown in state systems and services has a particular impact on girls and young women
4. **Economic security** – difficulties for families in making a living during and after conflict have particular impacts on girls.
5. **Gender roles and relations** – the way in which men and women behave towards each other even before the fighting begins affects girls during and after a conflict.

In Peace as in War

- **We saw in the first State of the World’s Girls report how even in times of peace, young women in many countries face discrimination on the grounds of their sex. Millions of young women face a double dose of prejudice and abuse just because they are female and they are young. They are more likely to suffer from poor nutrition and are less likely to go to school than their brothers. They are vulnerable to early marriage and health complications and to becoming one of the many victims of domestic violence. The institutions that should protect them and help them to realise their rights – family, community, school, the legal system, the police, the government – are all-too-often the very institutions that serve as instruments of their oppression.**
- **UNIFEM: ‘The extreme violence that women suffer during conflict does not arise solely out of the conditions of war; it is directly related to the violence that exists in women’s lives during peace time.’**

The Changing Face of Conflict

The nature of war, especially in relation to women and girls, has changed dramatically in the last two decades. Violent conflicts now tend to last a number of years, with varying levels of overt violence and very little certainty of lasting peace. This contributes to greater poverty and vulnerability, and to increasing numbers of people becoming internally displaced.

As civilians, young women increasingly bear the brunt of wars that no longer discriminate between soldiers and citizens. They may find themselves playing new, unfamiliar and challenging roles in the family and the community. For example, in the period leading up to, and also during and after conflict, it becomes increasingly difficult for families to find ways of supporting themselves. Poverty increases. As a result, girls may be forced into the labour market. This can mean unsafe paid work, commercial sex, or joining the armed forces. Or, if parents and relatives are killed or involved in the fighting, young women may find themselves with the responsibility of looking after younger children, running the household and having to make a living. Some are able to build new skills in order to manage their new lives; others cannot.

Many young women today have little alternative but to become combatants themselves. Sometimes this is because they are abducted and forced to serve as ‘wives’ of commanders and then find there is no way back. Joining a fighting force can be a way of gaining a degree of protection and social status, and may even be the only means of survival. Bearing a gun seems the only way to ensure access to security, food and protection and can provide freedoms that they never had before. ‘Koshe’ fought in the Kosovo Liberation Army in 1998/99 and said: “I’m not afraid. We are prepared to fight. We don’t do the cooking here, we fight with our friends.” One of the key ways of protecting young women, building their confidence, giving them hope for the future and preventing them becoming soldiers is education. And yet girls make up a large percentage of the 39 million children living in unstable or fragile states who are not in education. They may not be in school in any case, or their parents may keep them at home because they need them to do work, or they fear for their safety if they go out.

Young women's health is also compromised in times of war. During conflict, more women and children die from malnutrition, preventable diseases and complications of childbirth than die as a direct result of fighting. At the very time when they most need them, clinics and hospitals, doctors and nurses, and medicines and contraceptives are likely to be in short supply due to the instability of war.

There are other health hazards for young women in wartime. Sexual violence and rape have become not just by-products of conflict but deliberate tactics to destroy another's culture and change its future population. Young women bear the brunt of this and rape is a major contributing factor to the often deliberate spread of HIV.

War is not over with the Last Bullet

Even when the actual fighting is over, the absence of conflict is not necessarily 'peace' in terms of well-being and security for girls. Young women may be in as much danger immediately after conflict as during the war itself. For example, demobilised soldiers may be roaming the country and police and other legal and security services may still not be in place.

Female soldiers are often left out of demobilisation programmes for the simple reason that those in charge think of soldiers only as male. There are also increasing numbers of cases of young women being abused by the power-holders – from police to peacekeepers – who are supposed to be there to protect them.

Young women who return home may find the welcome they are given is less than warm, especially if they now have a baby. Rose, from Liberia, says: "The people in the village did not like me when I first came home. They made my life very difficult. I could not speak to them or spend time with other people my age. Because I have a baby and the father is not from my village and people do not know him, they think I am to blame. They do not understand that I was forced to be with him. They think I am a prostitute and that I will encourage their daughters. No one speaks to me."

They may have to find ways of making a living. Sometimes this means turning to hazardous work such as sex work, which then may lead to other problems such as drug use. This young girl in Sierra Leone tells her story: "I now live on prostitution... I live in the street exposed to all kinds of danger and I am tired of living in the street. To cope, I take drugs; either cocaine or brown-brown [crack]. [When I take the drugs] I feel relieved and I don't think of any problems, no bad memories of the war, and no sadness."

Telling our Stories: Listening to what Girls have to Say

Girls are the ones who know the risks they face during times of instability and have ideas about how to protect themselves. Families, communities, agencies and governments should listen to them and act on what they say.

For this reason, this report is full of stories of girls who have survived, run households, learned new skills and even represented youth in international forums after their experience of having lived through a war. The collapse of traditional restrictions during conflict can, paradoxically, sometimes give girls more opportunities and freedoms than they had before.

Girls' Voices

This report is driven by the voices of girls themselves, including those of girls from five countries affected by war and conflict, who came together for this report to discuss their lives and their visions for the future, as girls and young women.

"We hope that when we grow up we will be able to be the new leaders and bring change." Manar, 15, Palestine

"I want to live happily and peacefully, with all the things that I need. Now there are still displaced people, poor neighbourhoods and problems for the people. I want to change all this, and move beyond this crisis." Isaura, 16, Timor-Leste

"If women were given the opportunity to speak, they would speak. If the government could help them organise themselves they would have the tools for that. If women's rights are respected, there could be an improvement." Vanela, 20, Haiti

"I don't have a future...I can't write and I can't read. But if I had the opportunity to read and write and be a student, I would want to learn to be a teacher – to teach the next generation. I would like to send my children to school, even in wartime and in difficult times." Kurdish girl, 14, Iraq

"At the age of 13, I joined the student movement. I had a dream to contribute to make things change, so that children would not be hungry, later I joined the armed struggle. I had all the inexperience and the fears of a little girl. I found that girls were obliged to have sexual relations 'to alleviate the sadness of the combatants'. And who alleviated our sadness after going with someone we hardly knew?" Girl soldier, Honduras

"Today's girls should launch a revolution to obtain the real changes they have been expecting for. Lawmakers should contribute accordingly." Amédée, 19, Haiti

In Haiti, for example, the Youth National Forum (YNF) is chaired by Joassaint Gloussennette, a young woman of 18. It is a youth-led organisation working to tackle the endemic violence across the country. It has met with the Haitian President and Prime Minister to discuss young people's own ideas for tackling armed conflict in the country and is also concerned about inequality and gender violence. As Ginette, aged 17, said in an interview for the report: "Little strokes fell great oaks. Girls' voices are beginning to be heard. Haitian men should know that women also have rights as well as young girls."

Working hand-in-hand: What needs to be Done

Listening to what girls like these have to say is a first step. There are many other things that need to be done to protect girls and ensure that their rights are not violated.

Governments can make a difference. For example, the Liberian Government has used the opportunity of post-conflict renewal to introduce anti-rape legislation, and to reform inheritance laws in favour of women and girls. Similarly, since the introduction of new anti-rape legislation following the end of Sierra Leone's civil war, girls have used the local children's radio station to publicise the fact that rape is illegal and to insist that the culture of impunity should end. An increase in formal complaints and arrests has followed. International organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also have a role to play in protecting girls in times of conflict. They have a duty to ensure that appropriate legal and policy mechanisms are in place to protect girls' rights and security. International NGOs can never replace the role of governments, but in times of instability states often lack the means to fulfil their duties to their citizens. In this situation, international organisations must build the capacity of local organisations and communities to demand government resources as well as provide those services that are crucial for survival. International NGOs can also lobby for more effective and gender-responsive humanitarian and development assistance and legal protection mechanisms that work in favour of girls. The private sector should develop and implement youth employment programmes, as part of a strategy to secure peace. These programmes should focus not only on young men, but also on young women, in particular young mothers and vulnerable young women.

Eight-point Action Plan for Girls in Times of Conflict

1. **Strengthen the skills and capacities of girls' and youth organisations before, during and after conflict and ensure that girls have a say in all decisions that affect them.**
2. **Ensure that girls have a voice in peace processes and in truth and reconciliation commissions, where appropriate.**
3. **Reform legislation so that laws in place protect girls and promote their rights**
4. **Ensure enforcement by re-establishing the rule of law, train police and invest in a functional and appropriate legal system that protects girls' rights.**
5. **Promote girls' education in conflict, post conflict and fragile states and release funds to ensure a quality education for every child**
6. **Prioritise the particular health needs of adolescent girls and young women.**
7. **Enforce the code of conduct for UN personnel serving in conflict and post conflict zones so that they protect, and do not exploit, girls and young women.**
8. **Ensure that youth employment programmes, particularly in post-conflict states, focus on young women, especially young mothers, as well as young men, and ensure that girls have access to appropriate skills training and the means to earn a living.**

These recommendations are made in the hope that organisations and institutions at all levels will no longer ignore girls in their policy and planning. We believe that these changes will make a significant difference to the girls and young women whose lives have been caught up in or affected by conflict.

We need to listen to young people and to girls when they tell us that:

"We want more opportunities to take part in making decisions that affect us. We ask that you empower us and our organisations to be able to participate in a way that counts in all decisions that affect us. We do not want to be called in when you have already made the decisions. We want to work hand in hand with you."

It is our duty and responsibility as organisations working in conflict and post conflict zones, and simply as human beings, to build a better future for the millions of girls and young women living with conflict and its aftermath.