

Because I am a Girl

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS 2008



Special Focus: In the Shadow of War

Youth Summary

200 million girls live in countries that are affected by war.

'In the Shadow of War' looks at girls' lives in conflict situations around the world: what happens to them before, during and after a war, and makes recommendations for changes to girls' rights. It calls for people in power to take responsibility for making sure that girls survive, are protected, can reach their full potential and are able and allowed to take part in decisions made about their lives.

Nearly every country in the world has agreed that girls should have these rights by signing up to the U.N Convention on the Rights of the Child, but many young women still have their rights denied everyday, especially in war zones.

'Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2008' is the second of eight reports by Plan. Each report focuses on a different issue that affects the lives of girls and young women around the world. There will be a new report every year until 2015, the target year for the world to have achieved the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

"When you educate a man you feed his family but when you educate a girl, you educate a nation."

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia

When you think of War – What do you see?

Men with Guns. Tanks and Fighting. Families torn apart.

In the last 10 years more than two million children were killed during war. Six million children were injured and more than one million became orphans or separated from their families.

Whether they are civilians or soldiers, girls play a key role in times of war.

Because they are young, even though girls suffer from war, they are less likely than adults to have a say in what happens to them.

As this 17-year-old girl in Ghana said: ***'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.'***

39 million children can't go to school because of war; more than half are girls.

Conflict in Peacetime

The first State of the World's Girls report looked at how millions of young women in many countries are treated unfairly just because they are young and female. In peacetime, in everyday life, girls are less likely to go to school and they get less good food to eat than their brothers.

They are more likely to get married while they are very young, have health problems and suffer from violence at home. Surrounding girls, like the layers of an onion, are the people that are supposed to protect them and enforce their rights – family, community, school, the police, the government. These are often the very ones that take their rights away.

Violence against women and girls is a major concern.

What happens to girls in times of conflict, and the roles that they play, is part of their lives before and after the fighting. The violence aimed at girls in wartime doesn't only happen because of wars, it grows out of the violence that many girls face in peace time.

Thousands of girls and young women have suffered rape and sexual abuse in wars.



Girls in War – How are they affected?

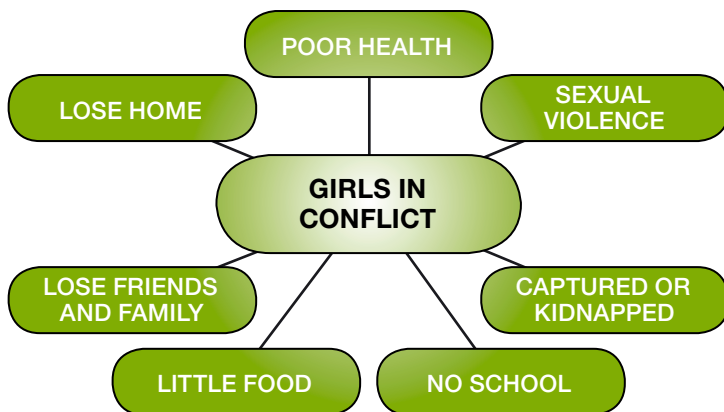
War has changed a lot in the past 20 years. Nowadays, wars can last for many years.

The line between war and peace has blurred and people's everyday lives have become a war zone. This means more poverty and vulnerability, and more people having to leave their homes. At the end of 2006, there were 32.9 million refugees and internally displaced people in the world; lots of these were women and children.

Nearly 90% of people killed or wounded because of armed fighting are civilians (normal people who are not involved in the fighting), more and more of whom are girls and women. At the start of the 20th Century this number was only 5%.

Today civilians are at as much or more risk than soldiers, and young women feel the effects of war more than ever. Girls may find their roles in the family or community change suddenly, for example, families may find it hard to support themselves so girls have to find work to provide an income or food for their family. This might be unsafe work, sex work or joining the armed forces. If their parents are killed or involved in the fighting, girls often have to take over their parents' role; looking after younger children, running the household and having to earn money to provide food and other essentials. Some girls find ways to cope with their new roles, some can't.

These are some of the ways girls are affected by war:



For a lot of young women becoming a soldier and joining a fighting force is a way to get some protection and feel more important. It might be the only way to survive.

Sometimes having a gun seems to offer security, protection and food, and can give girls a type of freedom 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."***

Some girls are taken from their homes and forced to live as the 'wives' of army chiefs.

There are about 300,000 child soldiers* in the world, around 100,000 are girls.



REUTERS / BEAWEHARTA, courtesy www.alefnet.org

War is not over with the last bullet

Even when the actual fighting has finished, the absence of conflict is not necessarily 'peace' in terms of well-being and safety for girls. For example, soldiers who are no longer part of the army and have no work may still be roaming the country, while police and other legal and security services may still not be in place. The risk of sexual violence is very high.

Young women who go back home may not be made welcome, 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. No one speaks to me."***

The risk of a woman dying as a result of pregnancy or childbirth is about one in seven in Sierra Leone compared with about one in 30,000 in Sweden

In times of conflict young women have their own needs that are different to those of boys and older women. But the effects of war on girls aren't considered when people measure the consequences of war. Nor do the experts spend time working out what might help girls and young women recover. They are not talked to about how to prevent war and the risks war brings. This makes their lives more difficult and ignores that they also have a lot of ideas to contribute.

"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

Why should we listen to girls?

Girls know the risks they face in times of conflict, and they have ideas about how to protect themselves.

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 bring a stop to deep-rooted violence across the country. Members have met with the Haitian President and Prime Minister to discuss young people's own ideas for stopping armed conflict in the country and is also concerned about inequality and violence towards girls. As Ginette, aged 17 said: ***"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."***

'Because I am a Girl' 2008 is full of stories of girls who have survived, run households, learnt new skills and even represented other girls in international forums sharing their experience of having lived through a war.

Girls' voices

"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

"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

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



REUTERS / RADU SIGHETI, courtesy www.albtrnet.org

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 make sure that their rights are not ignored.

» Governments

Governments can make a difference. For example, after the war in Liberia the Government passed anti-rape laws, and changed inheritance laws in favour of women and girls.

» NGO's

International organisations and non-governmental organisations* (NGOs) also have a role to play in protecting girls in times of conflict. They should make sure that girls' rights and security are protected. International NGO's can never replace governments, but in times of conflict governments are often unable to look after their citizens properly. In this situation, international organisations must help local organisations and communities.

» Private Sector

The private sector should develop youth employment programmes and put them into practice, as part of a strategy to secure peace. Programmes should also focus on young women, especially young mothers and vulnerable young women.

The recommendations are made in the hope that all organisations and institutions will think about girls in their policy and planning. We believe that these changes will make a huge difference to the girls and young women whose lives have been caught up in or affected by conflict.

Action Plan



Strengthen the skills and capacities of girls' and youth organisations at all times and make sure that girls have a say in all decisions that affect them.



Make sure that girls have a voice in peace processes and in truth and reconciliation commissions.



Reform (change) laws to make sure they protect girls and promote their rights.



Make sure laws are enforced, through training police and developing a good and legal system that protects girls' rights.



Promote girls' education in conflicted affected states and make funds available to make sure every child receives a good education



Prioritise the particular health needs of adolescent girls and young women.



Enforce the code of conduct for UN personnel working in conflict and post conflict zones so that they protect, and do not exploit, girls and young women.



Make sure that youth employment programmes, especially in countries that are post-conflict, focus on young women, especially young mothers, as well as young men. Make sure that girls can receive the right sort of skills training and find a way to earn a living.

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.

Glossary:

- **Girls Rights:** Human rights are those rights which are essential to live as human beings – basic standards without which people cannot survive and develop in dignity. They are inherent to the human person, inalienable and universal. Children are young human beings. There are things that should not be done to them for the simple reason that they are human.
- **Convention on the Rights of the Child:** The Convention on the Rights of the Child brings together all children's human rights in one international document created by the United Nations. All children have the same rights. All rights are interconnected and of equal importance.
- **Child Soldiers:** Child soldiers are children under the age of 18 who directly or indirectly take part in an armed conflict. These include children recruited to the country's army or to non-governmental armed forces.
- **Sexual violence:** violence of a sexual nature. It is a means of warfare when used to torture, extract information, degrade, intimidate and punish women and girls.
- **Non-Governmental Organization:** An organization created by private persons or organizations with no participation or representation of any government. The number of internationally operating NGOs is estimated at 40,000. Plan UK is an NGO.
- **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs):** In September 2000, 189 member countries of the United Nations signed the UN Millennium Declaration committing to combat poverty all over the world. The declaration outlined 8 'Millennium Development' Goals which form a "roadmap" for ending poverty, hunger and disease, making sure every child has a basic education and women have equal rights.
- **Refugees:** a refugee is a person who seeks protection in a foreign country because they can't stay in their own country. They might seek protection because they are suffering from war and personal violence, or because they are afraid of their own government.
- **Internally displaced persons (IDPs):** IDPs are people who are forced to leave their homes but who, unlike refugees, remain within their country's borders.

