

PLAN INTERNATIONAL POSITION STATEMENT

THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO LIVE FREE FROM VIOLENCE

Every child and young person has the right to live a life free from any form of violence, and deserves to grow up in a safe, peaceful, nurturing and enabling environment where they can fully exercise their rights.

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

- Plan International strongly condemns all forms of violence against children. We consider global levels of violence against children to be absolutely unacceptable. As many as three-quarters of all children have experienced violence in the past year, underlining how normalised the problem has become. Under international human rights law all children and young people have the right to live free from the fear or threat of violence. Plan International urges everyone to recognise the enormity and gravity of violence against children, and to prioritise ending this human rights abuse urgently.
- Plan International recognises that children experience different forms of violence at different stages of their development. We know that girls face more violence in their lives, and that girls and boys experience different forms of violence. Responses to violence against children must be inclusive, gender transformative and age-sensitive, to ensure that all children's experiences of violence are understood, responded to, and ultimately prevented.
- Plan International knows that ending violence against children, and particularly against girls, is complex. Nevertheless we believe that this is an achievable global goal – and is a strong legal, rights and development imperative. Ending violence against children requires action at international, national and community levels, increased financial and political commitment, and strengthened partnerships.
- We recognise that violence against children can be hidden and involve complex factors – both contribute to it going under-reported. We call on all actors to ensure that prevention and response mechanisms take into account the needs and concerns of victims. These must include child-friendly, gender and age-sensitive reporting mechanisms; strong child protection mechanisms to recognise the signs of violence early; and

response mechanisms that prioritise the needs of the child.

GIRLS AND VIOLENCE

- Plan International recognises that there are multiple forms of violence, and that there is a need to understand the distinction between gender-based violence, sexual violence and violence against girls. We recognise that these types of violence intersect and overlap. Girls are at an increased risk of violence as they reach adolescence and their gender roles become more defined.
- The violence that boys face must not be ignored. As a children's rights organisation, Plan International is committed to protecting the rights of all children. However, the evidence clearly shows that girls and young women face more violence – much of it hidden or normalised – throughout their childhood, adolescence and early adult years than boys and young men. Gaps in legal protections for girls who are at risk, or who are survivors, of violence must be addressed. Pervasive gender norms that condone the use of violence to control girls' sexuality must be overturned.
- For these reasons, Plan International prioritises ending gender-based violence, and violence against girls. We will dedicate time, resources and focus in order to achieve this. We urge all actors to take concerted action to increase global understanding of and response to violence against girls. We call for increased political will and financial resources to end this deplorable abuse of girls' rights.
- Plan International emphasises that girls must never be held responsible for the violence that happens to them. Violence is the sole responsibility of the perpetrator, who must be held accountable according to national or international legislation. Fear or threat of violence must not

restrict girls from living free and full lives, and from realising their full potential.

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK AND MECHANISMS

- Plan International believes that States must ratify and fully implement all conventions or agreements that relate to violence against children and gender-based violence. This includes all action points listed in obligations in those documents, as well as treaty body General Comments and treaty body Recommendations. This requires governments to align all national and local laws and policies accordingly.
- We know from our own research that international treaties fail to adequately protect girls from violence. This is both because these treaties are gender blind and because of reservations that limit their applicability. We respect cultural traditions, religious beliefs and social norms where these do not undermine human rights. However, countries should not use these to make reservations to international conventions and agreements in relation to violence against children and gender-based violence. States, along with other actors, must work to close the gaps in international law that allow violence against girls to continue.
- We believe it is important to collect data disaggregated by age, sex, ethnicity, religion, disability, location, wealth, marital status, sexual orientation and gender identity, and migratory status (with due protections for privacy and human rights). Data collection for adolescents must include the age range 10 to 14 years in order to make younger adolescent girls and their needs visible and to track progress against commitments, policies and programmes on girls and young women.
- Plan International also supports the call in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) for States to take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against girls and women.
- Plan International strongly condemns those who seek to undermine human rights standards, and in doing so weaken the protection of children against violence. We call on all governments to respect the human rights standards currently in place, to use these as a starting point for negotiations for progress on human rights issues, and to fight efforts to undermine or weaken these standards.
- Plan International calls on all governments to be transparent and accountable in implementing their commitments on the rights of children to live free

from violence. All girls, boys, women and men should be able to access information about national legislation and policy, and corresponding budgets and implementation plans.

- Plan International recognises the critical roles played by civil society, international organisations, campaigners and activists. This includes ensuring accountability, collecting data, galvanising political will, increasing pressure and securing adequate resources to end violence against children.
 - Gender dynamics drive violence against children, particularly girls. We call upon international actors, particularly those with a child protection mandate, to recognise and respond to these dynamics, and to increase efforts to tackle the high levels and differing forms of violence against girls. We commit to working in partnership with others to ensure transparency, accountability, mutual learning and strong results.
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CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AT INCREASED RISK OF VIOLENCE

- Plan International believes that approaches to ending violence against children must be holistic. They must ensure that systems are in place to protect every child from violence. However, we recognise that certain groups of children are more vulnerable to violence. Typically they are girls, children with disabilities, those with no legal identity or who speak out, those who come from ethno-linguistic minorities, those living in extreme poverty or affected by crisis, and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or questioning (LGBTIQ). Early childhood and adolescence are both stages at which children are more vulnerable to violence. We must prioritise those who are the most vulnerable and excluded, directing increased attention, resources and safeguarding to them, to ensure that no one is left behind.
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NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS

- Plan International believes that it is the responsibility of national governments, as the primary duty bearer, to uphold the rights of their citizens. But without comprehensive child protection systems, it is impossible to ensure the safety of all children. National governments must therefore ensure that effective, age-sensitive, gender transformative child protection mechanisms are in place. Others, such as civil society, UN agencies and the private sector should support national child protection mechanisms where appropriate. Systems must be fully funded and able to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable.
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SOCIAL NORMS AND VIOLENCE

- Plan International believes that the acceptance of violence in itself is a norm that must be challenged as a matter of urgency. It is crucial to challenge gender inequality and social norms that justify violence against children, adolescents and young people, and in particular against girls and young women, placing blame, shame and stigma on victims. Traditional, cultural or religious grounds should not be used to justify these norms. Violence is never acceptable, in any circumstance, and must at all times be considered a gross human rights violation. Violence is not a private matter – it must be uncovered in order for it to be challenged.
- Plan International believes that we must all promote and strengthen norms and values that support non-violent, respectful, nurturing, positive, gender equitable relationships for all children and adolescents, including the most vulnerable and excluded.
- To change attitudes, norms and behaviour, it is crucial to promote inter-generational dialogue on violence against children. Community dialogue can challenge negative attitudes around punishment and dominance, and views that children are the property of power holders rather than rights holders themselves. Dialogue should include children, adolescents, young people, parents, caregivers, traditional and religious leaders, health workers and teachers, and should be inclusive and accessible to all.
- Plan International opposes patriarchal systems that reinforce gender inequality and seek to control the lives and sexuality of girls and women through socially defined gender norms. These give lower status to girls and women and are used to justify violence against them. We recognise that girls and women have the right to bodily autonomy and to control their own sexuality. To end gender-based violence, we believe that these prevailing systems of power must be challenged and changed.
- We believe that creating positive change in behaviours requires an approach that engages boys and men as well as girls and women. Involving boys and men as stakeholders, rights holders and as agents of change is key to challenging dominant norms of masculinity, and to developing equal, safe, respectful and responsible, non-violent relationships.
- Plan International will also work with others to challenge discriminatory attitudes, norms and behaviours which drive stigma, discrimination and violence towards the most vulnerable and excluded children, particularly children, adolescents and youth who identify as LGBTIQ.

VIOLENCE AT HOME AND WITHIN FAMILIES

- Plan International considers the home to be the most important place in a child's upbringing – a space where they should feel cared for, nurtured and supported. With loving mothers, fathers or legal guardians, children can grow, navigate adolescence and transition into adulthood within safe bounds and with positive role models. No child, adolescent or young person should be subject to violence of any description in the home – including neglect, emotional, psychological, physical or sexual violence – or witness violence against others.
- Plan International strongly condemns intimate partner violence, and recognises that it disproportionately affects girls and women. Protective measures for victims of violence, including victims of incest, sexual violence and rape, should include effective mechanisms to ensure care, support and protection, including the provision of safe houses, access to healthcare (including emergency contraception), psychosocial support, access to safe abortion services and effective means to seek justice and redress. Support services should respond to violence against girls in a way that does not reinforce harmful attitudes.
- Plan International condemns the practice of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and sees it as a form of violence against girls. We call for the prohibition of the practice under national and customary law, and for the full and effective enforcement of these laws. In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) General Comment No. 4, Plan International believes that the minimum age for marriage should be 18 and that this should apply equally to both men and women, regardless of any provisions concerning parental or judicial consent.
- We condemn violent punishment within the home, and believe that corporal punishment is never an acceptable form of discipline. Positive parenting support and advice should include information and advice to reduce harsh parenting practices and create positive parent–child relationships.

VIOLENCE IN AND AROUND SCHOOLS

- Plan International asserts that every child has the right to learn in a safe and secure environment, free from the fear or threat of violence. This is an integral part of a quality education. Yet for many children, particularly girls, school is a place of threat and fear. Addressing attitudes and behaviours that support or legitimise violence at national, local, school and community levels, is a key intervention to prevent and respond to school-related gender-based violence.

- Plan International believes that it is unacceptable that any child should be a victim of violence either in school, or on the journey to and from school. This includes sexual violence or harassment, bullying and intimidation, and corporal punishment. Vulnerable and excluded children, such as children with disabilities, ethno-linguistic minorities, or children who identify as LGBTIQ, are particularly exposed to violence in and around school, either perpetrated by peers or by adults. This constitutes a serious rights violation, particularly when committed by those in positions of care or authority, and impacts on children's ability to enter, transition and complete school. Eliminating this violence should be a priority for all actors.
- Plan International recognises that quality education has a protective function, especially for girls and young women in humanitarian settings. We believe that a quality education is comprehensive, empowering, promotes respect for the dignity and value of all people, and provides a broad range of learning processes that include wider life skills and comprehensive sexuality education. Quality education should provide children and young people with the necessary skills and knowledge, attitudes and behaviours to lead positive and productive lives and to be responsible, active citizens promoting peace and non-violence.
- Plan International believes that all children, adolescents and young people – without discrimination – are entitled to comprehensive sexuality education to gain knowledge, explore values and attitudes, and develop the skills they need to make conscious, healthy and respectful choices about relationships and sexuality. Parents and educators should be supported to embrace children's learning about their bodies, relationships and sexuality from early childhood to allow children to explore, clarify and form lifelong healthy attitudes and practices, free from coercion, violence and discrimination.
- Plan International urges national and municipal governments to undertake gender reviews of laws, policies and guidelines to ensure that urban planning is gender responsive. Girls are affected disproportionately by violence in the community, and responses must therefore take the gender and age dynamics of such violence into account. Sufficient budget must be allocated at national and local levels to ensure full implementation.
- Plan International strongly condemns all harmful practices, including female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). We regard FGM/C to be a community-sanctioned form of violence against girls. FGM/C is a human rights violation and needs to be treated as such. FGM/C is linked to a perceived need to control female sexuality. Plan International believes that every girl and woman should have the autonomy and necessary knowledge to be able to make free and informed decisions about her body.
- Plan International believes that it is important to tackle FGM/C both through effective legislation and through awareness raising with communities about the physical and mental harm and long-term adverse impacts that result from this practice. It is crucial to engage families, communities and traditional and religious leaders in changing attitudes and norms around this harmful practice to ensure that it is no longer tolerated.

COMMERCIAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

- Plan International believes that no child should be subject to exploitative labour. While we recognise that some reasonable levels of work can be beneficial to children in addition to attaining an education, we demand an immediate end to labour that exploits children, causes them physical, emotional or sexual harm, interferes with their right to education, or puts them at risk of other hazards.
- Plan International strongly condemns the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), which disproportionately affects girls. CSEC puts children in grave danger – risking their emotional, psychological, physical and sexual health – and is a gross violation of their human rights. We urge governments to ensure that legal and protection frameworks are robust and can respond to and prevent such forms of violence. Child victims of commercial sexual exploitation are entitled to support, reparations and remedies, in line with international human rights law.
- Plan International is gravely concerned at the levels of violence experienced by young women and men engaged in sex work. We urge governments to review policies to strengthen legal protections and ensure that sex workers, particularly young women, can access support services and justice mechanisms.

VIOLENCE IN COMMUNITY AND PUBLIC SPACES

- Plan International believes it is vital that the communities in which children, adolescents and youth grow up are safe environments that do not pose a threat to their safety and development. No child, adolescent or youth should face violence, harassment and abuse in the street, in public spaces, on transportation, or on their journey to or from school. Fear and threats limit adolescents' and young people's capacity to live a free and full life. Communities have a collective responsibility to nurture safe, supportive environments that do not tolerate violence, and to prevent and respond to violence that takes place.

- Child and social protection systems have failed children who live and work on the street. Their rights to food, shelter, protection and health have been violated. As a matter of urgency they must be able to access care and protection services.
- Plan International recognises that children, and girls in particular, make up a significant proportion of human trafficking victims. We strongly condemn this practice, and urge all actors to address it as a priority. The trafficking of people across borders will not stop without international cooperation.

VIOLENCE IN EMERGENCIES

- Plan International believes that States must uphold their responsibilities under international law to all children without discrimination. Children seeking asylum or with refugee status have an equal right to protection from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect under the UNCRC. Children are individual rights holders under the 1951 Refugee Convention, entitled to all assistance and protection afforded to refugee adults.
- We recognise that during emergencies, particularly in situations of forced displacement, children are placed at heightened risk of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. Risks are particularly acute for unaccompanied and separated children who lack the immediate protection provided by parents, families and/or primary caregivers.
- We recognise that under the UNCRC and international humanitarian law, separated children have a right to be reunited with parents, relatives or guardians. States should pursue all practical measures to reunite children with their families.
- We recognise that risks for children in humanitarian settings vary depending on gender and age. In emergencies, child protection responses often overlook adolescent girls, yet they face specific risks due to both their gender and age. These include risks of sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage. Both child protection interventions and interventions to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence must be gender and age-sensitive.
- Plan International believes that strengthening the protection of children on the move should be a priority investment for governments of host countries and donors. This involves increased and more effective resourcing of both national and community-based child protection systems, to meet the needs of children on the move.
- We also believe that greater attention should be given to preventing and addressing the root causes of child protection issues in humanitarian contexts. This includes increasing access to

education and social protection; expanding opportunities for families to generate income; and supporting community dialogue and engagement towards conflict resolution.

VIOLENCE ONLINE

- Plan International believes that advances in information and communications technology present new and positive opportunities to children. Nevertheless the online space has led to a rise in abuse, harassment and violence against children that constitutes a human rights violation, and that must be tackled as an urgent priority. The associated dangers that the internet presents for children must not be underestimated, and global actors must increase efforts to ensure children's online safety and protection.
 - Plan International condemns practices that seek to silence the voices of girls and women online. We urge all actors to ensure that responses to violence online do not lead to suppressing girls' and women's freedom of expression. Girls must not be encouraged to step away from the digital world. Responses must focus on creating a safe online space, strengthening reporting mechanisms, and punishing perpetrators of violence, harassment and abuse.
 - We must continue to ensure that digital media does not perpetuate negative gender stereotypes, the sexualisation of girls and women, and unrealistic expectations of female image. Diverse representations of women and girls, men and boys in the media can have a positive impact on social norms around gender identity. The extremely damaging impact of pornography, particularly violent pornography, and the ease with which children can access it, must also be recognised as a significant issue globally. Responses must ensure that children are protected from accessing harmful materials online.
 - The use of the internet to facilitate the sexual abuse and exploitation of children is an abhorrent crime. Child sexual abuse and exploitation is no less a crime if it takes place online, and instances of this are rising. Governments and other actors must tackle this crime as a matter of urgency, with greater resources dedicated to investigating and prosecuting perpetrators.
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