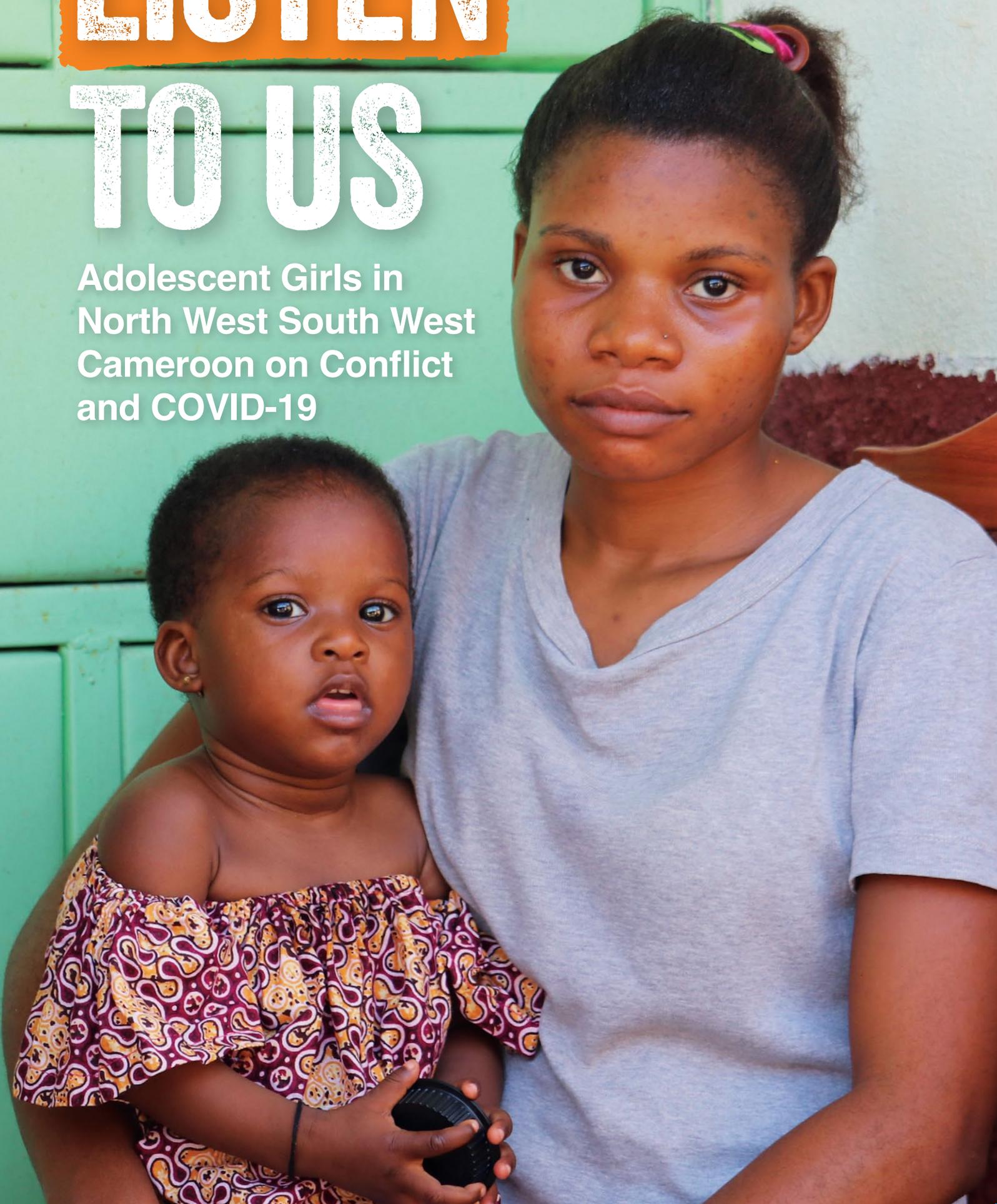




# LISTEN

# TO US

Adolescent Girls in  
North West South West  
Cameroon on Conflict  
and COVID-19



# CONTENTS

<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>KEY FINDINGS</b>	<b>7</b>
1. We are all afraid: <i>“Security, peace and ceasefire”</i>	<b>8</b>
2. Education is all-important: <i>“We would have loved to go to school”</i>	<b>10</b>
3. Health matters and the importance of empowerment: <i>“I did not have anyone to advise me”</i>	<b>12</b>
<b>CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>16</b>

# BACKGROUND

This report is the result of a multi-sectoral needs assessment exercise focusing on the rights and needs of adolescents living in the North West and South West (NWSW) area of Cameroon where conflict and COVID-19 combine to undermine their security at all levels and threaten their education and their health. Without support the consequences of this will reach far into the future. The assessment concentrates in particular on the lives and experiences of adolescent girls who are mothers, pregnant, or married and draws directly on their experience of living in a complex crisis situation.



The North West and South West regions of Cameroon have been engulfed in crisis since late 2016. Starting as a low-scale insurgency, within a year the conflict had spread across the two regions with separatists claiming the area should form an independent state called “Ambazonia.” Confrontations between Government Defence Forces and Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) have led to frequent roadblocks, “ghost towns,”<sup>1</sup> the indiscriminate killing of civilians, and the looting and destruction of property, perpetuated allegedly by both the state military and NSAGs. Civilians are caught in the crossfire between factions:

basic facilities have been repeatedly targeted, and the education system, health facilities and agricultural production have deteriorated. By the summer of 2019, the government still controlled the major cities and parts of the countryside, while the separatists held parts of the countryside and regularly appeared in the major cities. Approximately 3,000 civilians have been killed and the violence has forced nearly three-quarters of a million people to flee their homes, with over 60,000 refugees now in Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that three million people, from an Anglophone population of five million, have been affected by the conflict.<sup>3</sup>

1 Towns are shut down on specific days and all commercial activity banned

2 OCHA Cameroon Situation Report – 26 January 2021 <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/cameroon/>

3 Thematic Report ACAPS 19 February 2021

Education has been a key battle ground. The separatists imposed a boycott on formal education that uses the Government of Cameroon's curriculum, and many schools in the NWSW regions have been closed since the war began: early in 2021 under 30% of schools in the area were operational.<sup>4</sup> The impact of the fighting, coupled for the last year with the COVID-19 pandemic, has meant that an estimated 1,033,000 children have been deprived of an education.<sup>5</sup> On 24 October 2020, a group of unidentified armed men attacked the Mother Francisca International Bilingual Academy in Kumba, south-west Cameroon, shooting and killing at least eight children and wounding twelve others. Both the government and armed separatist groups have accused one another of perpetrating the attack, but no one has officially claimed responsibility. According to the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, more than 1,000 students and teachers have been threatened, abducted, injured or killed by armed groups or state security forces in Cameroon between 2017 and 2019. Most of these attacks took place in the Anglophone regions in the North West and South West of the country.<sup>6</sup>

*"We have less concentration in school because we do not know when there will be gun shots."*

**Adolescent boy, A Day in A Young Person's Life activity**

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, one armed group - there are several separatist factions with different aims and political agendas - declared a unilateral ceasefire to combat the spread of the virus. However other groups, and the Cameroonian government, ignored calls to follow suit and the fighting

continued. Education, and the young people who need it, continues to be caught in the crossfire.

*"Education used to be valued here, but since this crisis started, it is the source of many people's death and so if the powers that be don't mention education, we don't."*

 **Girl Empowerment Star Findings**

Civil war has continued unabated for four years with no sign of a political solution. The conflict in Cameroon has been listed by the United Nations Secretary-General in his annual report to the UN Security Council as an official Children and Armed Conflict 'Situation of Concern.' The report cited the gravity and the number of violations against children: including recruitment and use, killing and maiming, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access.<sup>7</sup>

*"Most of us [used to] finish school. Now we face serious challenges to go to school because of the war. Most girls now drop out because of unwanted pregnancy, poverty of the parents, insecurity of sexual abuse and outbreak of attacks from armed groups."*

 **Girl Empowerment Star Findings**

<sup>4</sup> Cameroon: The education crisis in the Northwest and Southwest. Thematic Report ACAPS 19 February 2021

<sup>5</sup> NWSW Education Cluster April 2020

<sup>6</sup> [www.global2p.org/publications/atrocities-alert-no-226-cameroon-afghanistan-and-guinea/](http://www.global2p.org/publications/atrocities-alert-no-226-cameroon-afghanistan-and-guinea/)

<sup>7</sup> Annual Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict A/74/845-S/2020/525, 9 June 2020 [www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/15-June-2020\\_Secretary-General\\_Report\\_on\\_CAAC\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/15-June-2020_Secretary-General_Report_on_CAAC_Eng.pdf)

Families in NWSW Cameroon face a two-pronged crisis, struggling with the virus, and with conflict: with poverty, insecurity and a lack of basic amenities and any real support. Attention is elsewhere, and the war in Cameroon, particularly as the global pandemic has taken hold, has been largely ignored by the international community.<sup>8</sup>

## **LISTENING TO ADOLESCENT GIRLS**

This assessment has used innovative methods pioneered by Plan International to capture the voices of adolescent girls and young women, alongside adolescent boys, young men and their parents and caregivers across the Anglophone territories of NWSW Cameroon. It speaks directly to adolescent girls themselves and gives them the space to voice their concerns and priorities: in particular, adolescent girls who are mothers, pregnant, or married, whose ideas, and needs, are often ignored. The overall objective of the assessment was to understand their multi-sectoral needs for safety and protection, education, health, food security and access to decent work.

## **WHAT WILL HELP ADOLESCENT GIRLS TO GO BACK TO EDUCATION SAFELY, GIVE THEM SECURITY TODAY AND HOPE FOR TOMORROW?**

The assessment employs a range of techniques and participatory tools<sup>9</sup> to capture adolescents' opinions and experiences: as well as discussions involving older adults, including parents and caregivers, and interviews with women and men engaged in service provision across the different sections and regions.

Some of the information about the impact of war and increasing poverty on girls' lives and opportunities may not be new. But the techniques, used in this context where the combination of COVID-19 and violent conflict makes participatory research especially challenging, are new. The emphasis on girls' voices gives the assessment an immediacy and authenticity which under these particular circumstances is remarkable.

Conflict and COVID-19 are making inroads into the opportunities available to the entire population of NWSW Cameroon but its impact will be felt most keenly by the young. During adolescence we gain skills and information that will inform our entire lives. In times of crisis, development is restricted and decisions made - particularly for adolescent girls and young women at risk of child marriage and teenage pregnancy - that will determine young lives. The lack of education, in terms of basic skills, qualifications and vocational opportunities missed, compounded by a lack of access to sexual and reproductive health education and resources, will follow them into the future.

During the assessment adolescent girls and young women reported how hard it can be for them to speak out: ***"it is not easy, though I do it, but I need a lot of courage to do so,"*** and how little control they feel they have over the essential decisions which affect their lives. Many organisations are working with communities trying to help them protect themselves and foster resilience. Involving those most at risk to understand how to do this effectively is crucial. This assessment, building particularly on the experiences of the girls and young women taking part, is a step in the right direction.

8 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/first-person/2021/2/16/Camerouns-separatist-war-children-biggest-losers>

9 <https://plan-international.org/publications/adolescent-programming-toolkit>

# METHODOLOGY

## ASSESSMENT DESIGN

Plan International Cameroon conducted the assessment with adolescents in ongoing programming areas across nine divisions of the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon. The assessment used a multi-method qualitative approach. The consultations with adolescents comprised of single sex groups of 6 - 10 adolescents.. The groups were split according to age: 10-14 and 15-19 years and used different participatory consultation tools from Plan International's Adolescent Programming Toolkit<sup>10</sup>:

### GIRL EMPOWERMENT STAR

**(GES):** this participatory tool supported a total of 140 adolescent girls (80 aged 10 to 14 and 60 aged 15 to 17) to assess their agency and level of empowerment in nine areas of their lives including their role in the household, school, marriage, money and safety.

### VISIONING EXERCISE:

a participatory tool that enabled a total of 204 adolescent girls (80 aged 10-14 and 124 aged 15-17), including young mothers, to explore their vision for the future. The visioning exercise helps girls to share their hopes for the future and identify both their immediate needs and longer-term priorities across education, livelihoods, health and safety.

### A DAY IN A YOUNG PERSON'S

**LIFE (DYPL):** this activity involved 200 adolescent boys (85 aged between 10-14 and 115 between 15-17) in exploring their daily routines, risks and agency, and how their activities and (gendered) roles have changed as a result of the conflict and COVID-19 pandemic.

The consultations with adolescents were complemented by focus group discussions with parents and caregivers, including young caregivers aged 18-24 years, and by key informant interviews with humanitarian service providers from the main sectors of the NWSW response:

**FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGDS)** a total of 36 groups, were held, involving 299 adults including 177 young caregivers (132 female, 45 male) and 122 adult parents and caregivers (58 female, 64 male).

**KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KIIS):** with 79 respondents (43 female; 36 male) from different sectors were conducted to assess the level of services available across the sectors and regions.

**DATA COLLECTION:** collectors were local Plan International and partner staff who work and live in the communities where the assessment was conducted. This arrangement aimed to minimise security risks and create a trusted environment for all participants. Conducting the assessment in communities where Plan International and other partners have programmes ensured that any participants disclosing SGBV incidents would receive timely and appropriate support.

**INFORMED CONSENT AND SAFEGUARDING:** Informed consent was obtained from both adolescents and their parents/guardians. Safeguarding risk assessments were conducted in order to understand and mitigate safeguarding and security risks for both researchers and respondents. Data collection was carried out in line with Plan International's ethical guidelines for data collection, storing and sharing, and the global policy on Children and Young People Safeguarding.

<sup>10</sup> <https://plan-international.org/publications/adolescent-programming-toolkit>

# KEY FINDINGS

*“I want to be a leader tomorrow and change many things that are going wrong in our country today.”*

**Girl, 15-17, taking part in the visioning exercise.**

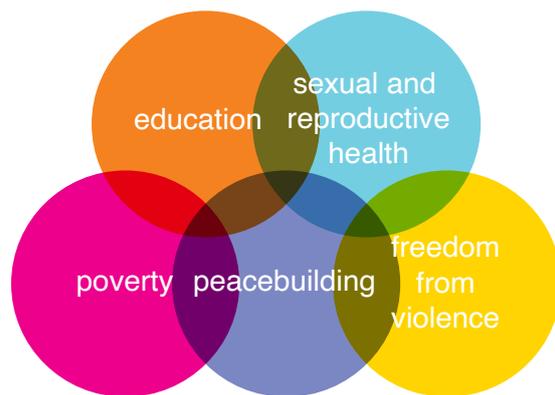
What stands out, loud and clear, from the research is that, despite the challenges they face, despite conflict, poverty and COVID-19, girls and young women continue to have high aspirations. They value education and understand its importance.

## AN OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS TAKING PART IN THE VISIONING EXERCISE PRIORITISED PROFESSIONAL CAREERS

It is evident, too, that their aspirations are undermined by pervasive gender inequality: adolescent girls reported doing more than their fair share of household chores, lacking confidence to speak out, feeling pressurised into child marriage and they were clear that educating boys, not girls, remained the priority for many families: one young mother reported that: ***“some girls who are first born have to sacrifice and work to take care of the little ones so they have to drop out of school.”***



© Plan International



Listening to adolescent girls talk about their lives reveals the importance of a multi-sectoral approach. Life is not lived in silos and in NWSW Cameroon conflict and COVID-19 affect everything and everyone. Education, including vocational training and learning about sexual and reproductive health, tackling poverty, peacebuilding and freedom from violence all emerged as strong inter-locking themes throughout the assessment process. Across the world the impact of the pandemic has fallen most heavily on the poorest and on those suffering under other long-term crises.<sup>11</sup> Community resilience, already undermined by conflict, is put under further stress by COVID-19.

<sup>11</sup> Red Cross: Rapid-response-primary-impacts-COVID-19%20(4).pdf



## WE ARE ALL AFRAID: “SECURITY, PEACE AND CEASEFIRE”

*“When fighting erupted families often run to hide in the bushes and this is where many adolescent girls were reported to experience sexual abuse by Non-State Armed Groups and other security forces, but also other community members especially boys and adult males.”*

**Focus Group Discussion,  
Young mothers, 18-24**

Peacebuilding and conflict resolution is a priority. The girls in the vision exercise summed up safety and protection priorities with the words “security, peace and ceasefire.” In the NWSW regions of Cameroon, war, violence and the fear of violence, impacts every aspect of people’s lives: their ability to earn money, to access education, and healthcare, to move about and to build opportunities for the future. Conflict and poverty heighten household tensions, can lead to increased gender-based violence<sup>12</sup> - including child marriage - disrupts education, and impedes progress towards gender equality. COVID-19 presents an additional layer of insecurity, compounding an already frightening situation, as people worry too about the spread of the virus.

Fear is one of the predominant emotions reported by participants in this study. Parents and carers are afraid for themselves and especially for their children. Adolescent boys and girls report being afraid of going to school and health centres due to the military presence:

they fear being victims of random arrest, harassment, rape, stray bullets, cross fire and violence, and a repeat of attacks on schools: **“we are in school but still in fear that they can come and kill us as they did in Kumba.”**

The presence of armed men puts girls and women at increased risk of sexual violence, including rape. Young mothers reported that girls experience **“rape due to the crisis where someone points a gun at your head and does whatever he likes.”** Women in the focus group discussions also reported violence, rape and sexual exploitation, in the context of selling or exchanging sex, as threats facing adolescent girls. The young mothers’ group described **“boys disturbing us, attempt to rape us, beatings from boys, boys forcing themselves on us and parents being over protective, beating us and shouting at us.”**<sup>13</sup>

Participants in the young fathers group agreed that rape and sexual violence was one of the major challenges facing adolescent girls in the NWSW regions.

Whole communities can become infected by greater lawlessness and adolescents forcibly recruited into armed groups risk being killed or maimed and may suffer severe psychological trauma.<sup>14</sup> About 90% of boys participating in DLYP methodology reported that their main security concerns were around being kidnapped, held by police, crossfire, attacks, stray bullets due to fighting, and to be taken as a soldier. Throughout the research both adolescent boys and girls report the **“fear of being recruited into armed groups by kidnapping.”** Adolescent girls wanted better security in schools **“so we feel safe.”**

Adolescent girls and young women can also be at risk as they look to earn money. Older people in the focus group discussions reported many concerns around adolescent

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.lawschool.cornell.edu/research/ILJ/upload/Manjoo-McRaith-final.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Plan International ensured, in all cases of SGBV disclosure or imminent protection concerns that cases were being handled appropriately by organisations present in the community.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>

girls working in child labour and young women being in jobs that are harmful and exploitative: including the risk of sexual violence, ill-treatment, and not receiving pay for work done. Adolescent girls' lack of education and qualifications pushes them towards indecent work in environments where they are exploited by their employers and by customers.

*Due to bad company of friends that give them bad advice they might end up doing all sort of jobs or becoming sexually exploited in the context of selling or exchanging sex to take care of their finances and that might give them venereal diseases like HIV.”*

**Young mother in Focus Group Discussion**

The young mothers in the focus groups talked a lot about the situation many girls found themselves in: **“there is abject poverty primarily due to closure of markets and commercial activities.”** They reported that: **“there are no places to go to learn, or to work and limited jobs to do to earn money - sometimes you work in a man’s farm and before he pays, he will want to sleep with you.”**

Young mothers taking part in the focus group discussions pinpointed **“lack of livelihood opportunities”** as being key to forced marriages. They talked also about how hard it is to **“take care of their children, feeding is poor, hygiene and sanitation are poor”** and describe bleakly: **“having no education, no access to some basic necessities like wash materials, education, and household needs.”** Focus group participants talked also of parents marrying girls off **“to settle their debts”** and others suggested that: **“some**

**marry because of their family, because their parents have difficulties in feeding the house so the girl might think going to live with the boyfriend will reduce the burden.”**

**90% OF RESPONDENTS MENTIONED LACK OF BASIC INCOME AS A PUSH FACTOR FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION.**



Adolescent girls stressed the importance of regular campaigns on protection against gender-based violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation: including sexual abuse, child labour, torture and recruitment into armed groups. Many girls reported feeling safe in their own communities but with reservations: **“Yes, all of us feel safe in the community, though we can be harassed anytime by unknown armed men.”**

The issues of poverty, protection, education and sexual and reproductive health are deeply intertwined in girls’ lives. Only when peace is restored can real progress be made towards tackling and renewing their right to safety, opportunity and any real choice in what to do with their lives.

*“We cannot even talk in our own houses since the “amba”<sup>\*</sup> boys could be listening; road interrogation by the fighters should stop, there should be free access to move around and we don’t want to see guns again.”*

**Girl taking part in the visioning exercise**

<sup>\*</sup> Ambazonia fighter or non-state armed group member

2.

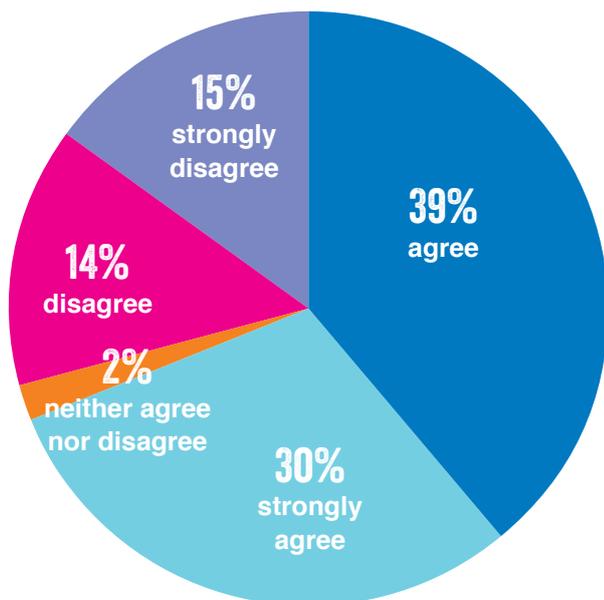
## EDUCATION IS ALL-IMPORTANT: “WE WOULD HAVE LOVED TO GO TO SCHOOL”

*“At times I am valued here because NGOs visit us from time to time to know about our well-being and give us some basic needs, but the community do not value girls here. They think girls need to be housewives and not be educated.”*

**★ Girl Empowerment Star Findings**

The girls themselves do not agree with their community. When asked whether they expected to finish secondary school the majority of girls taking part in the Girl Empowerment Star exercise said yes. One remarked, **“My sister finished school so I will also finish,”** and another participant stated, **“I don’t want to be maltreated by men because they think I am not educated and can use me anyhow they want.”**

**GES participants were asked, do all girls in this community expect to finish secondary school?**



However, they are also aware that their expectations will be very much affected by both conflict and COVID-19. Schools are a particular flashpoint in the NWSW region. Going to school can be dangerous. The fighting in the area also means that many families are unable to work and have little money available to pay for school fees, uniforms and books.

Adolescent girls taking part in the visioning exercise felt that: **“all girls should have something [productive to do] before engaging in marriage.”** Time and again this aspiration fails to materialise.

Teenage pregnancies and child marriages, often a poverty reduction strategy on the part of both the girls and their families, causes many girls to drop out of school: **“I’m not at peace because they want me to get married.”**<sup>15</sup> Sometimes parents encourage child marriage and in other cases girls themselves feel pressured to engage in risky and exploitative sexual encounters.

When asked about adolescent girls who were pregnant or young mothers being able to return to school, the majority were supportive.

**84% OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN PARTICIPANTS EITHER AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED THAT PREGNANT GIRLS AND YOUNG MOTHERS SHOULD CONTINUE TO ATTEND SCHOOL.**

<sup>15</sup> Plan International ensured, in all cases of SGBV disclosure or imminent protection concerns that cases were being handled appropriately by organisations present in the community.

They argued that all girls had a right to education and that educational qualifications would lead to employment and enable young women to support their children. Many also felt that by staying in school they would develop skills that would enable them to manage the situation they were in more effectively. They were under no illusion about how hard this would be and hoped for support, with both finance and childcare, from families and partners. They saw many parents as not being supportive, preferring their daughters to marry and become someone else's responsibility. This opinion was endorsed by older adults in the focus group discussions:

***“Some are forced by their parents to marry early because their in-law is a rich man.”***

Where families are supportive, girls are keen to continue their education: ***“some men and our parents give their support for us to go back to school if we wish to do so by taking care of the children.”***

Adolescent girls talked also about improving the school environment. Many schools are too far away and local ones are very overcrowded. There are not enough teachers particularly for science subjects and a shortage of books and equipment. During focus group discussions young mothers suggested that perhaps the generally difficult economic environment lowered the value of education: ***“some girls feel it is useless to go to school when after school, they won't get jobs.”*** Others suggested that in the current climate if any work did come along girls would prefer to drop out of school to seize the opportunity to earn some ready cash.

Education is not just about staying in school but where school remained a possibility, adolescent girls suggested help with food items, livelihoods and other basic needs: including financial and material support for fees, books, pens, school bags and sanitary pads. They also stressed the importance of childcare: without childcare in place returning to school was not seen as possible and many young mothers opted for non-formal education, which they could attend with their children, closer to home.

**75% OF ADOLESCENT MOTHERS, PREGNANT AND MARRIED GIRLS PREFERRED COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTRES THAT OFFER NON-FORMAL EDUCATION TO CONTINUE THEIR STUDIES.**



Adolescent girls wanted the authorities to provide learning centres in safe zones. They advocated the provision of vocational training. Young mothers taking part in focus group discussions emphasised the importance of self-reliance: those no longer interested in formal education should be assisted to learn a trade or craft.

*“We would have loved to go to school, but now that schools are not functional here in Njikwa Sub Division, we would like to learn trades or handwork. We need training centres for vocational training, community learning centres for at least primary level, to train and empower us on profitable gardening, animal farming and doing small-small businesses.”*

**Girls, 15-17, taking part in the visioning exercise.**

Adult participants and the young mothers group felt that learning centre activities should also focus on educating adolescent girls about sexual and reproductive health and rights, including contraception, abstinence, safer sex, relationships and menstrual health

and hygiene, and how to protect themselves from sexual pressure, abuse and all forms of gender-based violence.

Keeping girls in school, or providing any form of educational support, during a complex crisis is no easy task. There is already resistance to girls' education as reported by many parents and caregivers in the adult focus group discussions: **“most parents say the education of a girl child is wastage.”** Other women in the group said disapprovingly that **“when girls become too educated, they tend to challenge the man.”** Girls themselves commented that they **“are not given much opportunity because parents prefer to**

**send boys to school.”** Pregnancy and young motherhood put up additional barriers to girls continuing their education. They need help of varying kinds – financial, emotional and practical support – from many different people if more enlightened attitudes are to prevail.

*“Girl child education is very necessary because it builds the community, reduces early marriages, early pregnancy and increases population”.*

Older women, Focus Group Discussion



### HEALTH MATTERS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPOWERMENT: “I DID NOT HAVE ANYONE TO ADVISE ME”

*“We do not really understand our menses and how the cycle works. So pregnancy will come at any time even if you don't want...the pregnancy surprised me, I did not have anybody to advise me.”*



**Girl, 15-17,  
Girl Empowerment Star Findings**

During the assessment adolescent girls discussed how crucial access to information is to protect them from harm. They saw health education, especially sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) education as a priority, and emphasised bringing health care closer to the people, having skilled workers, especially nurses and doctors, and prioritising health for pregnant women and girls. Women's groups reported that the crisis and lack of school had created multiple challenges for adolescents. Unwanted pregnancies, they felt, were partly due to idleness and unprotected sex also exposed

adolescents to STIs including HIV/AIDS. Illiteracy, lack of schooling and lack of correct knowledge about safer sex combine to put young women at risk.

The role of parental guidance was the subject of discussion in the young mothers' group: they encouraged parents to advise, **“on what is good and bad because being strict won't solve the problem.”** Advice should include educating adolescent girls about sex and sexuality and the young mothers' group recognised that many parents might need training to enable them to do this. Adolescent girls also recommended that their parents, and the wider community, be educated on the value of education for girls.

The assessment findings clearly show a need for increased dialogue, awareness raising and parenting sessions addressing adolescent SRHR. Parents need support to feel able and confident to talk about SRHR: they need accurate information about sex and sexuality and about available health services – and the ability to communicate this - in order to pass it on to their daughters.



© Plan International

**90%** OF THE PARTICIPANTS FEEL THAT PARENTS, PARTICULARLY THE FATHER WERE KEY IN DETERMINING GIRLS' ACCESS TO EDUCATION, WORK AND OTHER SUPPORT.



The role of the family was seen as crucial, too, in instilling self-confidence: **“teach them to believe in themselves.”** Results from the Girl Empowerment Star activity underscore adolescent girls' awareness of the value of empowerment, of building confidence: **“yes, it is a good idea to be able to express yourself .... women now are very intelligent and have good ideas they can contribute to making the community better.”** However, speaking up is not easy.

**67%** OF ADOLESCENT GIRL RESPONDENTS FEEL THEY CANNOT SPEAK UP IN FRONT OF AN ADULT MALE



Empowering adolescent girls emotionally and with concrete information needs to go hand in hand with a recognition of how much they want emancipation, financial independence and self-determination in their future. This longing to assert some control over their lives, often expressed, as we have seen, with an emphasis on educational and material support, is a big priority for older adolescent girls: **“I would like to go to OIC Buea and learn how to cook well so I can get a job in a hotel or open my own restaurant.”** Adolescent girls have not relinquished their dreams: they want to become teachers, nurses, doctors, engineers, lawyers, hairstylists, journalists, singers, tailors, accountants, bankers, entrepreneurs, marketing managers, Rev Sisters, builders, actresses, seamstresses, philanthropists and President. Truly empowering them, so they can help themselves to realise the aspirations they are clinging to, means working with whole communities and requires investment from the state and from international donors and NGOs.

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*“I will invest in my studies since I want to become a nurse.”*

★ **Girl, 10-14,  
Girl Empowerment Star Findings**

It is clear from the assessment carried out that adolescent girls in the NWSW area of Cameroon see education as the key to a better life for them and for their communities. The setting up of community schools, safe and local and with a varied curriculum, is a priority. Many girls and young women do aspire towards the educational qualifications that would take them to university and into professional jobs but as the impact of both the conflict and COVID-19 changes their lives they look for different routes and for different information. Some prioritised vocational training and the opportunity to earn money to support themselves and their families, not just in the future but now.

*“If places were safe, and I have a chance to decide on my money, the school will be a sure thing for me. But since the crisis is very serious here, I can only do business, buy medicine, food and clothes.”*

★ **Girl, 15-17,  
Girl Empowerment Star Findings**



© Plan International

Adolescent girls and young women recognise that their parents and carers also need outside assistance to improve their income generating abilities. They want both training and investment to help set up small businesses, not only for themselves, but also for older family members.

Others emphasise the importance of information about sexual and reproductive health to lower the risks of early pregnancy saying, **“I don’t even know what I have to do to avoid pregnancy.”** Health education, psycho-social support and access to counselling were additional priorities. One adolescent girl wanted **“to become a counsellor so as to advise young girls on how to navigate through life.”** Adolescent boys could see that often parents preferred to educate their sons and that in times of crisis different coping strategies were available according to gender: **“The girl easily gets in to marriage but the boy easily changes town and find jobs to survive.”**

Other priorities include education for their parents, particularly in SRHR issues, to enable them to help their children. Adolescent girls also stress the importance of ongoing campaigns to emphasise girls' rights, the importance of girls' education, and to combat gender-based violence. Sexual violence and the fear of it is a pervasive theme throughout the assessment.

Underlying the broad focus on education – safe schools, vocational training, SHRH information, campaigns, parental training and dialogue - adolescent girls emphasised the

overall importance of peace, recommending ceasefire and negotiation as the major safety and protection solutions. This will need political will and political pressure but with peace incomes will improve, schools will open and opportunities emerge. Not too late, it is to be hoped, for the aspirations of this generation of adolescent girls to be realised.

Based on this assessment's findings and in consultation with adolescent girls, Plan International makes the following recommendations:

## WE ARE CALLING ON MEMBER STATES TO:

- **Take** concrete measures to put an end to attacks against schools and the use of education facilities by armed forces and non-state armed groups. They must support compliance efforts with the Safe Schools Declaration in Cameroon, taking into account the particular ways that adolescent girls and educators are impacted by attacks on education in this conflict. Member states should be vocal about attacks on education and push for accountability for those who commit abuses against children and educators.
- **Make** substantive efforts to improve the situation of children and adolescents in NWSW Cameroon, especially given the United Nations Security Council's Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) mandate where Cameroon's status is now an official 'Situation of Concern.' Member states should support UN-led efforts and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG-CAAC) to report and prevent the six grave violations against children in the conflict: the killing and maiming of children; recruitment or use of children; sexual violence against children; abduction of children; attacks against schools or hospitals; and denial of humanitarian access.
- **Support** genuine efforts for a peaceful solution to the crisis that is in the best interest of civilians including children and adolescent girls. Member states should significantly increase active international support for peace talks, encourage inclusive dialogue, and offer funding for talks and for an independent mediator.
- **Increase** advocacy efforts for unobstructed access to communities in the NWSW in line with International Humanitarian Law. Member States need to raise their voices in national and international (COHAFA/SECCO) fora and condemn such obstructions. Additionally, donors need to be understanding of access challenges that frequent and sudden lockdowns bring for implementing partners. Flexibility in funding and implementation to allow organisations to build in remote management and activity plans would be welcome.

## WE ARE CALLING ON THE GOVERNMENT OF CAMEROON, AT ALL LEVELS OF ADMINISTRATION, TO:

- **Reinforce** concrete measures to prevent and prepare for attacks on educational facilities, students, and teachers. This includes sustained commitment to the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration, and law enforcement and reporting mechanisms that ensure that the rights of children are promoted and upheld. It is essential that actions recognise and address the gender-related dimensions of attacks on education: as schools close down girls are at greater risk of not being able to return to education.
- **Ensure** safe and unhindered access to affected areas and populations in need of humanitarian assistance and protection.
- **Listen** to the girls' calls and declare a ceasefire in NWSW Cameroon. Set an example for all armed actors to take a humanitarian pause during a cessation of hostilities, which will allow for children and adolescents to be safe, to access services, and allow humanitarian and medical personnel to treat and deliver vaccines to conflict-affected populations during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Increase** efforts to reduce violence, particularly sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against adolescent girls. This includes addressing the root causes of SGBV through learner-centred teaching in formal and non-formal settings, and awareness raising with families and communities. Ensure quality SGBV response services are available and safely accessible to all adolescent girls and young women.
- **Strengthen** efforts to support teachers to use learner-centred teaching approaches, that contribute to the psychosocial wellbeing of learners, and help teachers manage stress in their own lives. Maximise access to quality education and vocational training, by reducing inequalities between girls and boys.
- **Renew** efforts for inclusive dialogue and a timely commitment to active peace talks with an independent international mediator for a peaceful solution to the crisis, that is in the best interest of civilians, including children and adolescent girls. Commit to supporting conflict resolution and inclusive peacebuilding initiatives at all levels that include the representation and active participation of adolescent girls and young women, incorporating their unique perspectives, experiences, and agency.



## WE ARE CALLING ON HUMANITARIAN ACTORS AND DONORS TO:

- Take all necessary measures to **address barriers to education for out of school adolescent girls and boys, in particular adolescent mothers and pregnant girls.** Such measures should include working in collaboration with the Education Cluster and key education community stakeholders to:
  - Strengthen the capacities of community learning centres which are adolescent girls', particularly pregnant girls' and young mothers' preferred option for continuing their education. They must be supported and funded to provide safe, flexible and relevant non-formal learning opportunities including life skills, comprehensive sexuality education, vocational training and accelerated education.
  - Identify alternative strategies to provide access to learning opportunities where schools and/or community learning centres are not available or functioning because of insecurity or COVID-19. Strategies may include multidisciplinary mobile outreach teams including education, SGBV and health, home based learning through peer-to-peer support and self-learning kits.
  - Support education community stakeholders to conduct risk mapping and analysis related to access to education, including risks related to insecurity and COVID 19, and implement risk prevention and mitigation measures at school/community learning centre level;

- Work in collaboration with protection partners **to prevent, end, and respond to the six grave violations against children in the conflict and to ensure the protection of adolescents, in particular adolescent girls who are out of school, married, pregnant or young mothers**. Key measures should include:
  - Support monitoring and reporting mechanisms of the six grave violations against children in conflict, ensuring that implementing partners are not put at risk.
  - Prioritise the prevention of and response to SGBV wherever it occurs and ensure child protection and GBV referral pathways and services are gender- and age sensitive, safe and accessible for adolescent girl survivors of violence.
  - Address the economic drivers of sexual exploitation, child marriage and child labour, by promoting food security and livelihoods for families, as well as vocational training, apprenticeships, income generating activities and decent work for (older) adolescents and young mothers.
  - Empower adolescents with life skills, information and access to services.
  - Engage in advocacy and information sharing at all levels to raise awareness of the situation of children and their needs
  
- Design and implement a **comprehensive strategy to support adolescents, in particular adolescents who are out of school, adolescent girls who are married, pregnant or young mothers**. This should include:
  - Prioritise the meaningful engagement of adolescents, in particular adolescent girls, in all phases of humanitarian response including needs assessment, programme design, implementation, review and evaluation.
  - Engage with gatekeepers - adolescent girls' parents and caregivers, (male) family members, husbands and in-laws and community leaders - to improve girls' participation, mobility and access to services.
  - Integrate education/learning and child protection programmes with multi-sectoral services: **health**, including sexual and reproductive health rights information, supplies and services, **food security and livelihoods** for vulnerable households with out of school children, nutrition for pregnant and lactating mothers, **childcare and early childhood services** to support adolescent girls who are married, pregnant or young mothers to access learning opportunities, **parenting programmes** including parent support groups to promote positive parenting practices and birth registration.
  - Set up **an interagency task force** that provides technical assistance to help inform programming for adolescents: focusing on the development of tools and resources, building the capacity of national and community stakeholders, and on advocacy.

## **About Plan International**

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected.

As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and 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 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

### **Plan International**

Dukes Court,  
Block A,  
Duke Street,  
Woking,  
Surrey  
GU21 5BH  
United Kingdom



[twitter.com/planglobal](https://twitter.com/planglobal)



[facebook.com/planinternational](https://facebook.com/planinternational)