

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

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 South West area of Cameroon, where conflict and COVID-19 combine to undermine their security at all levels and threaten their education and their health. The assessment employed a range of innovative techniques and participatory tools¹ to capture young people's opinions and experiences and concentrated in particular on the lives and experiences of adolescent girls who are mothers, pregnant, or married: giving them the space to voice their concerns and opinions. Listening to adolescent girls and young women living in this complex crisis situation emphasises the importance of a multi-sectoral approach. Life is not lived in silos and in NWSW Cameroon, conflict and COVID-19 affect everything.

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

Girl taking part in the visioning exercise.

BACKGROUND

The North West and South West regions of Cameroon have been engulfed in crisis since late 2016. 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.² It is estimated that three million people, from a population of five million, have been affected by the conflict.³ Education has been a key battle ground 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.⁴ 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.⁵

"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

KEY FINDINGS

1. WE ARE ALL AFRAID.

Adolescent girls and boys report being afraid of going to school and health centres due to the military presence: they fear being recruited by armed gangs, being victims of random arrest, harassment, stray bullets, and more attacks on schools. They fear sexual violence and adolescent girls reported: *"rape due to the crisis where someone points a gun at your head and does whatever he likes."*⁶ Families struggle to feed themselves and older girls take on exploitative work, engage in harmful sexual activity and in some cases are forced to marry early in order to alleviate the pressure on family incomes: *"sometimes you work in a man's farm and before he pays, he will want to sleep with you."*

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



2. EDUCATION IS ALL-IMPORTANT.

Adolescents understand that continuing to learn whether at school, in community centres or taking part in vocational training, is the only way to protect their future.

"We would have loved to go to school, but now that schools are not functional here, we would like to learn trades or handwork. We need centres for vocational training... to train and empower us on profitable gardening, animal farming and doing small-small businesses."

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

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

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

3 Thematic Report ACAPS 19 February 2021

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

5 NWSW Education Cluster April 2020

6 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

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



Adolescent girls and boys recognise that pregnancy and young motherhood are barriers to continuing education and they support the return to school for those in that situation. They know that many parents are not supportive of girls' education and in times of economic hardship prefer their daughters to marry and become someone else's responsibility. *"Some are forced by their parents to marry early because their in-law is a rich man."* Above all, what stands out, loud and clear from the research is that, despite the challenges they face, girls and young women continue to have high aspirations.

An overwhelming majority of adolescent girls taking part in the visioning exercise prioritised professional careers.

3. EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS

with Information and advice, particularly about sexual and reproductive health and rights, is crucial. They were quite clear that without knowledge and access to health resources they will never be able to realise their aspirations. Apart from professional help and support from nurses, doctors and health clinics, adolescent girls also talk about the need for more parental guidance. It was recognised that parents need support: 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 children. 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:

"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."

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Underlying the broad focus on education – safe schools, vocational training, information about sexual and reproductive health and rights, campaigns, parental training and dialogue – adolescent girls emphasised the overall importance of peace: 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.

The recommendations that follow, from Plan International, based on consultation with adolescent girls, are addressed to the Government of Cameroon, to United Nations member states and to humanitarian actors and donors. They must work together to promote peace, freedom from fear, access to education and empowerment, in particular for adolescent girls who are mothers, pregnant or married.

- **Support** genuine efforts for a peaceful solution to the crisis and commit to inclusive peacebuilding initiatives at all levels, that include the representation and active participation of adolescent girls and young women.
- **Declare and maintain** a ceasefire in NWSW Cameroon and ensure safe access to affected areas and populations in need of humanitarian assistance and protection.
- **Increase** efforts to reduce violence, particularly sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against adolescent girls: addressing the root causes through awareness raising with families and communities. Ensure quality SGBV response services are available and safely accessible to all adolescent girls and young women.
- **Reinforce** concrete measures to prevent attacks on educational facilities, students, and teachers: recognising and addressing the gender-related dimensions of attacks on education.
- **Take** all necessary measures to address barriers to education for out of school adolescent girls and boys, in particular adolescent mothers and pregnant girls. Strengthen the capacities of community learning centres to provide safe, flexible and relevant non-formal learning opportunities, including life skills, comprehensive sexuality education, vocational training and accelerated education.
- **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, income generating activities and decent work for (older) adolescents and young mothers; empowering adolescents with life skills, information and access to services.