



Laban Onisimus, Plan International

Civil Society Briefer Remarks

**United Nations Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict
June 28, 2021**

Madam President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting Plan International to give a briefing on children in armed conflict with a specific focus on girls' lived realities.

My name is Laban Onisimus. I work for Plan International as an Education Specialist in Nigeria, leading teams in humanitarian operations in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria focusing on gender-responsive child protection and education in crises.

In my three years working for Plan International I have witnessed the protracted crisis in the Lake Chad Basin take its toll on the 17 million people living in the region. It has impacted countless lives, causing death, destruction, fear, vulnerability, insecurity – needless human suffering. It remains one of the most severe humanitarian emergencies in the world, spanning parts of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger, not forgetting the crisis in the Sahel region – Mali and Burkina Faso, as well as the ongoing and neglected conflict in Northwest Southwest Cameroon.

The impact on children, and on girls' lives, has been catastrophic. In 2020 alone, the UN Secretary-General has reported the killing and maiming of 124 children, including 39 girls in Nigeria. The UN has verified that these atrocities were carried out by state and non-state armed groups. This is the tip of the iceberg: we believe that these numbers are much higher.

I will be speaking today on the specific impact of grave violations against children in armed conflict, in particular on girls.

Security Council CAAC resolution 2427 in 2018 was the first CAAC resolution to acknowledge the specific needs and vulnerabilities of both girls and boys, but we have a long way to go to recognize, understand, and address the experiences of girls in armed conflict who are subjected to all six of the grave violations. In the Lake Chad Basin, girls are being specifically targeted in attacks, and we are seeing an exponential growth in violations against girls, who make up 50% of victims. I am here today to call upon the Security Council to increase efforts to protect girls, who are on the frontlines of these attacks.

Abduction of children

The attacks on girls were brought to global attention following the abduction of 276 girls in Chibok in 2014. As I speak to you today, some of these girls are yet to return home. Some parents have died while waiting for their children to return. Most abductions do not make international news, and the number of abducted girls is in fact much higher.

There has been some positive response on the side of the government – including endorsing the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD), and hosting the Safe Schools conference later this year in October. But more needs to be done to domesticate the framework at the community level – I believe that will go a long way in helping us to address the problem holistically.

Sexual violence against girls

2020 saw an alarming 70% rise in rape and other forms of sexual violence compared to the previous year in countries on the CAAC agenda, with girls comprising 98% of all victims. We are horrified to hear this large increase, which is still likely far lower than the true number.

Having worked directly with victims of sexual violence I can attest to the physical and mental health consequences and trauma faced by survivors, who often do not have access to adequate healthcare, an issue that has severely worsened due to targeted attacks on healthcare facilities.

Girls' traumatic experiences together with stigma impact their ability to pursue their education and move on with their lives in other important ways.

Attacks against schools

Thousands of adolescent girls have been denied their right to education and a dignified life because of this **11 year crisis**, a root cause of which is hostility toward secular education, with repeated attacks on schools, universities, teachers, administrators, and students. **2,295 teachers** have been killed trying to protect children's lives and their right to education. More than **1,400 schools** have been destroyed. And to date more than **600,000 children** have lost access to education.

I have personally supervised the rebuilding of several blocks of classrooms that have been destroyed as a result of the crisis and have repeatedly seen these being destroyed and burned down by armed groups.

Schools should be places of safety, and no child should have to choose between their education and their life – but schools are now a soft target and schools for girls are especially targeted as a tactic of war.

Permit me to read a quote from one of the girls that has regained her freedom after an attack on her school.

After the attack, I told my parents I would never go back to school. Before [the attack], I was so passionate to study and achieve my dream of being a lawyer. But now, this experience has completely demoralized me.... I told my father that I will never go back because of threats and what I saw that night.

Recruitment and use of girls

In Northern Nigeria girls are targeted by armed groups for use as suicide bombers. Between June 2014 and February 2018, about **468** women and girls have been deployed or arrested in **240 suicide attacks**, the most any terrorist movement has used - killing roughly **1,200** and injuring some **3,000**.

Almost all the female suicide bombers are adolescent girls who have often been influenced or forced to carry out these attacks.

Denial (delay & diversion) of humanitarian access

In Northeast Nigeria, humanitarian hubs have also been deliberately attacked. The denial of humanitarian access disproportionately impacts girls and women, who comprise the majority of those in need of humanitarian assistance in the Lake Chad region. Gender inequalities shape and influence vulnerabilities in times of crisis – with adolescent girls affected in distinct ways. There are clear connections between food insecurity, child and forced marriage and disruptions to the right to education. Yet in spite of this, girls are mostly not consulted in decision-making to ensure that humanitarian response is meeting their needs. The outright denial of humanitarian access – including through blockages or direct attacks only worsens their situation.

Our Recommendations to the UN Security Council and the International Community

Despite the challenges they face, adolescent girls in the Lake Chad region and all of the countries where we operate demonstrate resilience, entrepreneurial skills, a commitment to hard work, a desire to help others, optimism for the future – attributes essential for any society if it hopes to transition towards a peaceful, prosperous and secure future.

Plan International is calling on the Security Council and the International Community to;

- Recognize and take immediate steps to address the fact that girls are being specifically targeted in conflict, and are subjected to all six grave violations against children in armed conflict.
- Address the use of girls as a weapon of war. Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups have unique experiences, face specific risks, and must be included in the design of gender and age-sensitive programs and policy.
- Demand and pursue accountability for all those who target and attack schools, kill and maim students and teachers, and abduct girls, ensuring all parties to conflict fulfil their obligations under international law.
- Help us to make the safe and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian assistance to children a reality, by allowing humanitarian access and humanitarian personnel to do our important and life-saving work.
- Lastly, the Security Council, Member States, and the UN must do better in conflict prevention. Conflicts today that could have been prevented or cut short are lasting for years. We urge you to uphold your commitment to mainstream child protection in conflict prevention, conflict, and post-conflict situations with the aim of sustaining peace and preventing conflict.

Children and adolescent girls deserve to survive, to recover, and to have their youth full of safety, stability, and hope. They will one day lead our world and we owe it to them to give them a chance. **We must not fail them.**