



ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN CRISIS

VOICES FROM THE LAKE CHAD BASIN

Summary Report



The crisis affecting the Lake Chad Basin is one of the most severe humanitarian emergencies in the world. More than 2.2 million people have been displaced, half of whom are children, and at least 10 million need assistance across north-east Nigeria, Cameroon's far north, western Chad and south-east Niger.

In the past few years much has been written about the challenges facing those caught up in the crisis but very little focuses on the specific needs of adolescent girls, or on their role in building peace and prosperity in the region. Nor is it often recognised that during long-term crises the physical safety, health and future prospects of adolescent girls are all threatened in ways that differ from the risks faced by adolescent boys or adult women.

This study by Plan International explores the ways in which adolescent girls within two age brackets (10-14 and 15-19) deal with the impact the crisis has upon them. It seeks to amplify their voices and perceptions of the crisis and presents their views on how the international community might respond.

LAKE CHAD RESEARCH LOCATIONS



An adolescent girl from Niger.

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WHAT DID THE GIRLS TELL US?

THEY HARDLY EVER FEEL SAFE: Across all research sites girls reported feeling afraid. Physical and sexual violence impacts almost every aspect of their lives. They feared conflict-related violence and abuse at the hands of insurgent groups or state armed forces, but were also physically assaulted in their communities, and at home.

"We don't feel safe at night as boys take advantage of the darkness to bother us."

GIRL, 16, SAYAM CAMP, NIGER

Many girls said survivors of sexual assault are stigmatised by their communities. Some are forced to marry their attacker.

"They married her out to the rapist."

GIRL, 17, NJITMILO, NIGERIA

Research participants also spoke of girls being forced to have relationships with men – survival sex – in order to find money for food, clothes and school.

"I know victims as far as servants working with rich people are concerned. These girls are often raped by their master or by their boyfriends so as to have money."

GIRL, 16, MORA, CAMEROON

ALMOST A QUARTER
OF ALL GIRLS SURVEYED (21.21%) SAID THEY'D BEEN HIT DURING THE PAST MONTH.

THEY GO TO BED HUNGRY: Girls lack food and water because armed groups are destroying access to farming. This means communities are not only unable to feed their families but are also losing out on vital income.

"Younger ones eat, older ones drink water and go to bed."

YOUNG WOMAN, 18, NJITMILO, NIGERIA

62%
OF GIRLS SURVEYED REPORTED GOING TO BED HUNGRY AT SOME POINT OVER THE LAST MONTH

THEY NEED INFORMATION ABOUT SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH:

A lack of information about sexual and reproductive health is threatening girls' lives, especially as the Lake Chad Basin has one of the highest ratios of maternal deaths anywhere in the world: 773.4 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births.

"When a girl reaches the age of 14 and above, she will have a boyfriend. It is very easy for her to get pregnant because she does not have enough knowledge about sex and her menstrual cycle."

GIRL, 16, GAHARA, NIGERIA .

THEY WANT TO LEARN, BUT ARE PREVENTED FROM DOING SO:

Adolescent girls want to go to school but often can't continue into secondary education because they are needed for household chores or work at home.

"I am proud of being enrolled in school here in Kaleri. It's one thing I am always happy and proud of."

YOUNG WOMAN, 18, KALERI, NIGERIA

"[My biggest achievement is] doing well in school and going to higher grades."

GIRL, 13, BLABLIN, CAMEROON

In many cases, adolescent girls are forced to leave school in order to get married. Many participants noted that early marriage had increased since the crisis and the most common age at which girls are married off is 14-15, coinciding with the end of primary education.

"Early marriage is a result of insurgency, because parents cannot afford to take care of the children."

FEMALE PARENT/ GUARDIAN, ZARMARI, NIGERIA

**JUST OVER 15%
OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AGED 10-19
ACROSS ALL RESEARCH SITES
WERE CURRENTLY OR HAD PREVIOUSLY
BEEN MARRIED**

THEY HOPE FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE:

The research shows that despite the enormity of challenges facing them, adolescent girls demonstrate impressive resilience, entrepreneurial skills, a commitment to hard work and a desire to help others.

They also show an understanding of what's needed to improve their futures and the ability to articulate it. Adolescent girls are, for example, acutely aware of the role that poverty plays in their lives and how lack of money, and the skill to earn any, will limit their own lives and make it difficult for their communities to rebuild.

"Help people, especially orphans and widows. Give them something to do or learn, like a trade."

GIRL, 19, GAHARA, NIGERIA

There are several key factors they identified as crucial to their survival and their ability to support their families and communities:

- **Education and Skills:** significantly improve well-being and optimism among adolescent girls and provide the building blocks for the future
- **Female Leaders and Peer Support:** girls described older women in their families and female community leaders as a great source of inspiration, as was the ability to talk to other adolescent girls and share their troubles.
- **Safe Spaces:** where they could both talk to others and access information also contributed to adolescent girls' well-being and security.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We know that girls have asked for support, physically, emotionally, practically and in terms of safeguarding their future; they emphasise the importance of education and are determined to contribute to rebuilding, not only their own lives, but their communities and nations. The recommendations that follow are based upon their priorities:

- **Include us:** promote and fund efforts that encourage adolescent girls to take part in all decisions that affect them; ensure their needs and basic human rights are met.
- **Educate us:** encourage families to keep girls in school and provide vocational and skills training.
- **Keep us safe:** improve security conditions for all adolescent girls and work with families and communities to tackle the underlying discrimination that leads to violence against adolescent girls.
- **Provide for us:** promote measures to ease the economic crisis and improve access to food and water.
- **Inform us:** make sure that girls have access to appropriate health care and in particular have the knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and rights that they need to keep safe and protect their futures.

"Enrol us in schools, provide skills acquisition, provide basic amenities [hospitals, electricity, water] so as to help us live our lives better and easier."

GIRL, 13, MISHARI, NIGERIA



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No photographs were taken during the course of this research. Girls featured in images in the report are not the same as those that participated in the research.

Plan International in Lake Chad

The Lake Chad Programme is a joint initiative from Plan International's Country Offices in Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria as well as the West and Central Africa Regional Office. It was established in 2016 in order to address the crisis in the Lake Chad Basin through an integrated and regional programme approach, which will be extended to Chad, taking into account the regional dimension of the crisis and its interdependence while ensuring country-contextualised programming, which will be extended to Chad. Our work is focused on the sectors of education in emergencies, protection (child protection and gender-based violence) and livelihoods to enable protection and youth economic empowerment. We are committed to analyse, understand and address the unique needs of and risks faced by girls, and working with girls themselves and their communities to address root causes of gender inequality and promote girls' rights in the Lake Chad region.

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.

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