



# ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN CRISIS:

## VOICES FROM THE SAHEL



**PLAN**  
INTERNATIONAL



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CENTRE FOR GENDER AND DISASTER



**UNFPA**

# CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>SETTING THE SCENE</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED</b>	<b>5</b>
Girls are traumatised and live in fear	5
Girls value education: the destruction of schools	6
Girls struggle to stay healthy: both physically and mentally	7
Girls have little say over their lives	8
Girls want to earn money	12
Hope and Resilience: towards a better future	13
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>ENDNOTES</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>20</b>

*Please note that none of the girls pictured in this report are research participants.*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was conducted with adolescent girls, their families and communities in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso and Mali where people struggle with a long, complex and violent crisis. Its primary focus is the rights and voices of adolescent girls.



*Claire, 13, is a Plan International sponsored child from Burkina Faso.*  
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## KEY FINDINGS

### GIRLS LIVE IN FEAR AND BUILDING PEACE IS THEIR PRIORITY

The pervasive insecurity impacts on all areas of their lives – education, health, food and livelihoods. The fear of armed men is compounded by more “everyday” violence at home and in the wider community.

### GIRLS VALUE EDUCATION

Education not only protects them now but builds hope for the future.

### GIRLS PRIORITISE INFORMATION ABOUT SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

They need access to psychosocial support.

### GIRLS ARE HELD BACK BY THE RESTRICTIVE NORMS AND ATTITUDES OF THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Early marriage and the lower value attached to girls’ education further limits their opportunities. Adolescent girls have little say in the decisions that affect their lives.

### GIRLS’ LIVELIHOODS ARE IMPORTANT TO THEM

They want to earn money, to contribute to their families and to help secure their future.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Adolescent girls talked about their needs and their anxieties but testify also to their hopes: they are full of ambition and this ability to envisage a better future, is, in itself, a source of strength. The following recommendations are based on what girls have told us about their experiences; they aim to address girls’ rights and increase their ability to contribute to rebuilding their lives:

- Governments and the international community must prioritise peace-building negotiations, uphold the rule of law and adhere to international humanitarian standards and commitments.
- Schools, teachers and students must be protected and the particular barriers that impede adolescent girls’ access to education be recognised and lifted.
- Access to information about sexual and reproductive health, contraceptive supplies and essential medicines must be prioritised by humanitarian organisations and local authorities, as must services for pregnant girls and women.
- Gender-based discrimination must be tackled and this includes supporting attitudinal and behavioural change through community mobilisation and engaging with adolescent boys and men as advocates for girls’ rights.
- Livelihoods, the opportunity for adolescent girls to earn money, must be protected and vocational training and support for small businesses be made available..

# INTRODUCTION

The *Adolescent Girls in Crisis* series<sup>1</sup> is informed by and centred upon the voices and experiences of girls at risk in some of the world's most volatile and impoverished locations. This latest report focuses on the protracted crisis in the Sahel region and talks to girls and young women affected by violence and insecurity in Burkina Faso and Mali. The research also includes interviews with adolescent boys, parents, guardians and other key members of their communities in order to better understand the social context and expectations that form girls' experiences and shape their lives.

There is a dearth of evidence on the situation of adolescent girls in this conflict context and their unique needs are unseen and unmet. Their age and gender make them particularly vulnerable to the surrounding violence, which many have lived with all their lives, and which affects every aspect of their existence. However, their voices are rarely heard and their rights to security, education, health - not protected in the best of times - are rarely upheld in the worst of times.

Girls have the right to be consulted about their needs and priorities, and having a better understanding of the ways in which adolescent girls, in several different contexts, navigate ongoing crises, will provide a solid basis for the humanitarian sector to work with them. Our research project seeks to further this understanding: focusing not just on areas of concern for adolescent girls, but also on the positive ways in which they respond to their circumstances and strive to support their communities.

The research explores how adolescent girls within two age brackets of lower and upper adolescence (10-14 and 15-19 years old respectively) understand the unique impact that crisis has had upon them. It is driven by a desire to understand, what factors have most impact on the insecurity of adolescent girls in the Sahel, how they navigate this insecurity and what positive changes would help them feel more secure.

“ It's health and when we are happy, because when we are not happy nothing can go forward. ”

GIRL IN 10-14 FOCUS GROUP,  
TOUGAN, BURKINA FASO



Nakani, 11, pours water into a bucket at her home in South West Mali.

(©Plan International)

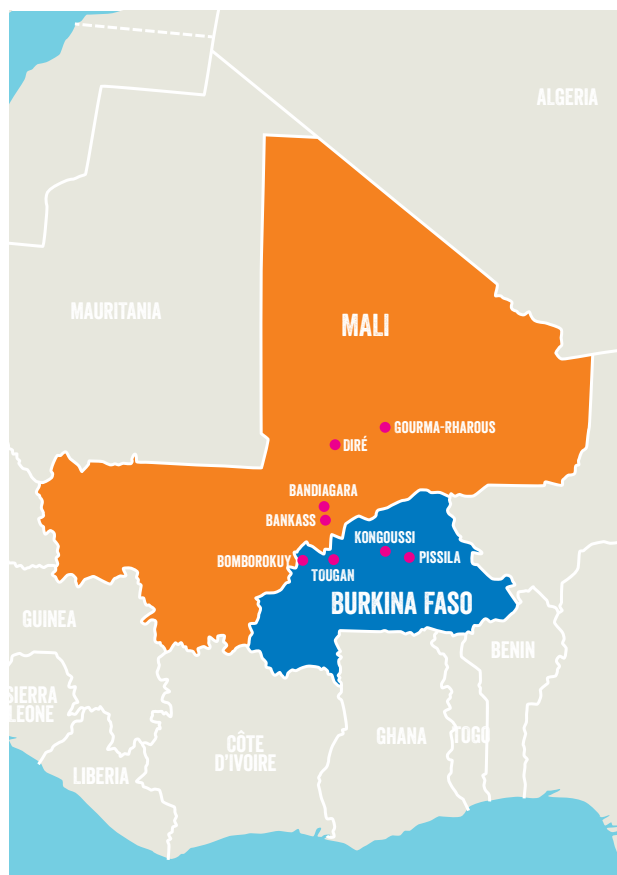


# SETTING THE SCENE

“The Sahel region confronts global policymakers with a huge set of serious challenges – fragile states, poverty, refugees and migrants, transnational organised crime and armed jihadist rebellions.”<sup>2</sup>

MORTEN BOAS, RESEARCH PROFESSOR, NORWEGIAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

In 2019, the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators for Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger warned that the Sahel crisis was ‘reaching unprecedented levels’.<sup>3</sup> An already insecure situation, has been made much worse by long-running intercommunal tensions and repeated violent attacks involving non-state armed groups which are costing thousands of lives and having a major impact on the delivery of basic services, including education, health, food, water and shelter. In Mali this has been exacerbated by persistent drought. All this has caused an unprecedented increase in internally displaced people and refugees who are arriving in host communities already struggling with a complex state of emergency.



## THE SAHEL CRISIS

BURKINA FASO

7,000%

RISE IN CIVILIAN FATALITIES

2019 CIVILIAN FATALITIES<sup>4</sup> COMPARED TO 2018



MALI

300%

RISE IN CIVILIAN FATALITIES

848,329

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE



MORE THAN 239,000

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

BURKINA FASO

MALI

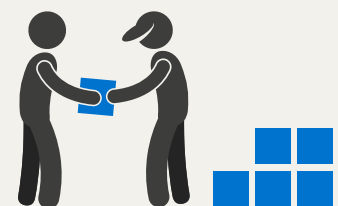


3.7 MILLION PEOPLE

FACE FOOD INSECURITY<sup>7</sup>

7.5 MILLION PEOPLE

REQUIRE URGENT ASSISTANCE<sup>8</sup>



BURKINA FASO

2,500

SCHOOLS ARE CLOSED DUE TO INSECURITY<sup>9</sup> (PRE-COVID CLOSING FURTHER SCHOOLS.)



MALI

1,100

SCHOOLS ARE NON-FUNCTIONAL<sup>9</sup> (PRE-COVID CLOSING FURTHER SCHOOLS.)



Women and children queuing for water in the Mentao camp in Burkina Faso.  
(©Plan International)

The research in Burkina Faso and Mali was designed to focus on the key issues identified by adolescent girls in Plan International's previous research on protracted crises: **security & violence, education, health, participation, voice and visibility**. Two additional topics, **work and livelihoods and unmet basic needs**, emerged during the research process and have been included in the current study.

As will become clear, these are not watertight categories. What emerges is a set of interconnected risks, faced by girls in times of emergency, with violence running relentlessly through their experiences - undermining their human rights and their security.<sup>10</sup> **Underlying everything, informing all areas of the research, is the influence of powerful and harmful social and gender norms which shape every girl's life.**

**“** Often you can't do what you want, because you don't belong to yourself. **”**  
GIRL IN 10-14 FOCUS GROUP, KONGOUSSI, BURKINA FASO

Our research was undertaken just ahead of the global COVID-19 crisis and its consequences do not feature in the study. However if the pandemic follows the course it has in other countries, the loss of education and of livelihoods, the lack of food, the stress on health services, the increase in gender-based violence and the restriction of movement will undoubtedly increase the risks girls face as the virus increases their responsibilities and further limits their opportunities.<sup>11</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

### Research sites

Data was collected in February 2020 in eight sites: Bandiagara, Bankass, Diré and Gourma Rharous in **Mali** and Tougan, Bomborokuy, Kongoussi and Pissila in **Burkina Faso**.

### The research uses mixed methods

A total of 72 single sex focus group discussions (FGDs) of six to 12 participants were conducted with 412 adolescent girls and 148 boys, and a further 151 parents and guardians across the two countries. Additionally, 67 key informant interviews (KIIs) were carried out with adolescent girls, community leaders, local authorities, community-based organisations (CBOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – a total of 123 interviews. We also used a quantitative survey, conducted across the two countries with a total of 378 adolescent girl respondents.

### Ethics

Plan International sought external peer-reviewed ethical approval on the tools and methodology prior to data collection taking place and ethics protocols were submitted to national ethics committees in both countries. Local risk assessments were also conducted with the security and safeguarding teams in the two countries and risks were monitored throughout. Principles of confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent were applied and the research was fully compliant with Plan International's Global Policy on Child and Youth Safeguarding.

# WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

## GIRLS ARE TRAUMATISED AND LIVE IN FEAR

**“** *I am sad because I was chased from home by force by the terrorists.* **”**  
GIRL IN 14-19 FOCUS GROUP,  
BURKINA FASO

Building peace is the key priority if families and communities are ever to rebuild their lives. Thousands of children have been forcibly displaced and numerous accounts from parents in both Mali and Burkina Faso stress that their children, girls and boys, are traumatised by the violence they witness and afraid of what could happen to them. As one community leader in Burkina Faso explained: *“the killings, the injuries in front of the children traumatised them, they were very afraid because these children had never experienced this before.”*

In Tougan, displaced girls have been separated from their parents which makes them even more fearful: *“I’m afraid at night. Not during the day. I’m scared because at night there’s a lot of things you can’t see because there are jihadists there. I’m scared if I go out, he might run into me and then kill me”*. Young woman, 19, Tougan, Burkina Faso

A group of boys in Burkina Faso told researchers: *“A teenager is afraid to see an adult person die in front of him.”* Others stressed that they find it hard to sleep: *“At night, we discuss among ourselves and then we go home to sleep. In reality, we don’t manage to sleep. Our ears are focused on outside noises in case there is a problem so that you can escape.”*

In areas where displaced children go to school with children from the host communities their fear can be contagious: *“There are children who tell us ‘Mummy, we have friends who came here because they were chased with their parents out of their village.’ This situation really scares our children.”* Mothers, Tougan, Burkina Faso

### “We are too afraid ...”

In Mali, everyone’s mobility is restricted due to attacks. In Gourma Rharous, adolescent girls explained that they want to go to the market, they want to collect firewood or they want to visit their parents in the neighbouring village but they are too afraid: *“we often hear gunshots. This is what has woken me up this morning for example”*.

The armed men and the prevailing insecurity have an impact on access to basic needs. In some areas, food is inaccessible rather than scarce: it is unsafe to travel to the fields or the markets. And as water points close to home are destroyed girls are put at greater risk when they go to collect it.

In Diré, young women stressed: *“we don’t have the right to wander between villages like before”* and there is a curfew at night. In Gourma Rharous, one 18-year-old stated: *“I am scared I might get kidnapped”* and others backed this up: *“I am afraid someone could appear from nowhere and hurt me.”* A man working at a local town hall emphasised: *“Everybody is afraid to go out at night, especially girls. Boys are more courageous and take risks”*. In some areas, faced by terrorist attacks, girls talked of feeling safer when local defence groups are formed to protect the villages.

### Everyday violence

Girls in Mali overwhelmingly reported feeling safe at home, in Burkina Faso nearly half of the research respondents felt unsafe and 11 per cent reported having been hit in the past month by their father or brother. Girls in both countries talked about violent incidents, often as they go long distances to collect water and aggressive behaviour and insults were reported by 21 per cent of girls.

**“** *We all know each other, but to get water at the pump, it is every man for himself and God for us all.* **”**  
GIRL IN 15-19 FOCUS GROUP,  
BANDIAGARA, MALI

Violence and the fear of violence are facts of daily life for adolescent girls and they contend also with their vulnerability to ‘everyday GBV’, including forced marriage, marital rape, physical and sexual violence or sexual exploitation which increases in times of crisis.<sup>12</sup>

**“** *Marriage frightens us. We’re afraid of marrying a man who beats us.* **”**  
GIRL, IN 15-19 FOCUS GROUP,  
BOMBOROKUY, BURKINA FASO

Girls face a denial of their rights in their everyday lives and this gets worse in crisis affected areas where schools have closed, information and support are in very short supply and tensions are high.

## GIRLS VALUE EDUCATION: THE DESTRUCTION OF SCHOOLS

“ [The crisis] affected me, because the crisis has reached Gombélé. They say they're going to burn down the schools. So, they brought me to Bomborokuy. ”

GIRL, IN 10-14 FOCUS GROUP,  
BOMBOROKUY, BURKINA FASO

Schools have been one of the primary targets of terrorist attacks in both Mali and Burkina Faso and many remain closed. In some areas although children still go to school, they, and their teachers, are often afraid. One girl explained that once there was an explosion on the way to school and so she wants the road to be safe. In Gourma Rharous, one girl stressed: “I am afraid to go to school, people attack us in the school yard.”



IN CONFLICT AFFECTED COUNTRIES  
GIRLS ARE  
**2.5X MORE LIKELY TO  
BE OUT OF SCHOOL.<sup>13</sup>**

The loss of village schools forces students to travel long distances and often stay away from home, not a solution that is acceptable to the parents of girls: “We notice in the city of Tougan, boys who got together to live in a house and continue to go to school. Others have found a rented place. But it is not so straightforward for girls, because girls who live by themselves are exposed. So, there are parents who prefer that their daughters stay [back in the village].” Mayor, Burkina Faso

Adolescent girls, from the host communities and those displaced, expressed a passion for study and a disappointment that their current situation prevents them from attending school or gaining access to vocational training.

“ I go to school because I like a lot of things at school, I like all the teachers who are there, they teach us well, that's why I like them. ”

GIRL, 16, BOMBOROKUY,  
BURKINA FASO

From what adolescent girls tell us it is not just conflict, poverty and insecurity that is having an impact on their school attendance but pre-existing discrimination.



Kadia, 14, at her home  
in Koulikoro region, Mali.  
(©Plan International)

“ People here don't like that we go to school. They give us in marriage at the earliest age. ”

GIRL, 14, GOURMA RHAROUS, MALI

In many of the research areas, in both countries, girls are not going to school not just because schools have been destroyed or attendance is unsafe but because they have reached the age when it is customary that they stay at home to prevent them mixing with boys.



**1/3 OF GIRLS  
IN BURKINA FASO AND MALI  
HAD NEVER ATTENDED SCHOOL OR  
ATTENDED FOR JUST A YEAR**

One 14-year-old in Mali explained that girls' husbands are not willing to allow them to go to school and another told us that girls are often “given in marriage when they are 13 or 14.” Similar comments emerged from Burkina Faso and one 15-year-old girl stated: “I had two girlfriends, they got pregnant and quit school, they are now at their husband's house.” When questioned about what happens to boys if they get a girl pregnant, she laughed: “He can continue the lessons, the girl can stop the lessons.” When asked if people encourage girls to go to school, she added: “Sure, one encourages but without reducing domestic chores ...”.

Adolescent girls also drop out of school in order to leave their village and find jobs as domestic workers in nearby towns. This too is often connected to getting married with the money earned going towards their marriage trousseau.

While earlier education is generally valued by parents and widely encouraged, norms around girls' roles take precedence as soon as they reach puberty, when pregnancy becomes a risk, and this affects their access to education regardless of the context.



## GIRLS STRUGGLE TO STAY HEALTHY: BOTH PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY

In deprived communities, where malnutrition is a chronic problem, the struggle to stay healthy is never easy. It is much harder when, as in the Sahel crisis, insecurity means that basic needs often remain unmet. Girls from displaced communities talked about hunger and one 14-year-old explained that she eats twice a day and eats a little in case there is not enough food to go round. Another 15-year-old girl said that her elder brother, who works as a nurse, leaves her some money so she buys her food but only eats once a day: *“often because the money my big brother leaves me here, if it runs out I’m afraid to call him and tell him, thinking he’ll say I wasted the money, so I remain hungry.”* Going hungry affects both mental and physical development and will store up problems for the future as well as having a severe impact on the individual’s capacity to deal with the challenges of the present.

Adolescent girls, particularly those who have been displaced, emphasise in their interviews that they have little or no access to information about sexual and reproductive health and, in the area of mental health especially, have restricted access to health services. Where health centres are accessible, many stressed the cost of prescriptions and medicines.

**“** *When you get sick, sometimes you don’t have enough money or means of travel to get to health centres ... when we arrive at the infirmary, we may be given a prescription that is beyond our means and this is also a problem for us.* **”**

GIRL IN 15-19 FOCUS GROUP,  
PISSILA, BURKINA FASO

Their age and gender also mean that their health can too easily be compromised by gender-based violence, sexual abuse and early pregnancy.



DEATH DURING CHILDBIRTH IS THE  
**SECOND BIGGEST**  
**CAUSE OF DEATH**  
WORLDWIDE FOR GIRLS AGED 15-19<sup>14</sup>

Early pregnancy may also result in life-threatening and life-changing physical injuries, such as obstetric fistula, common in girls who are not physically mature enough to give birth.

## “You have to try to understand ...”

Girls may lack knowledge about their bodies. They often do not have the ability or the resources to get to available health services to access information.<sup>15</sup> But they do understand how important this is.

**“** *I don’t know everything, but you have to try to understand so as not to get into trouble. We can talk about it with the mother, but it’s better to go to the hospital to find out, then you’ll be able to express yourself well. [ ... ] there are also others who are ashamed to ask, to ask questions about how things are going, but if you don’t ask you can’t know.* **”**

GIRL, 15, TOUGAN,  
BURKINA FASO

The inability to gather vital information, particularly in the area of sexual health and menstruation, is made much worse by embarrassment and shame. A 13-year-old girl in Bandiagara, Mali, had no idea what menstruation was and another emphasised that: *“often we are ashamed.”* A 17-year-old in Mali spoke for many when she explained that she finds it difficult to obtain information about sex because she feels embarrassed to bring up the subject.

Another told researchers: “Young women enter sexuality for the first time out of curiosity or because of love for boys without having information. Others do ask. Regarding contraception, we ask advice to NGOs, nurses or community volunteers.”

Many of the issues that girls face, stemming from lack of access to information, lack of contraception and the complications of childbirth, are not caused by conflict or disaster but the consequences are so much worse in crisis situations. But the consequences are so much worse in crisis situations. Poverty and malnutrition increase as does early pregnancy and early marriage; mental health is made worse by fear, insecurity and violence and help is harder to find.

**“** *If security is maintained, there won’t be any jihadists. NGOs and doctors will be free to sensitise girls and this will enable girls to stay healthy.* **”**

GIRL, 17, GOURMA  
RHAROUS, MALI



Salimatou, 15, at her home in Koulikoro region, Mali.  
(©Plan International)

“ I am not married yet, I am afraid to fall pregnant and of bad omens. ”

GIRL IN 15-19 FOCUS GROUP,  
GOURMA RHAROUS, MALI

## GIRLS HAVE LITTLE SAY OVER THEIR LIVES

“ We are in Africa. Generally, a girl can give her opinion but the decision is taken by men, she does not have a say. ”

MAYOR, BURKINA FASO

The *Adolescent Girls in Crisis* studies have shown that during emergencies adolescent girls are more strictly supervised than ever. Protective parents, a heightened fear of violence and increased domestic chores, combine with security measures to confine girls to the home. In the Sahel crisis this restricted mobility affects all aspects of their lives. It makes them less visible to their communities and decisions about their own lives – about marriage, work and education -- are made largely without them.

“ Frankly speaking we don't have the chance to participate in decisions regarding our education. It's our parents who make the final decisions, it's them who decide if we are to go to school, they decide everything relating to our education. ”

GIRL IN 10-14 FOCUS GROUP,  
BANDIAGARA, MALI

Girls and young women are restricted also by the belief that the honour of the family rests on their sexual behaviour, and they must behave accordingly.<sup>16</sup>

In both Burkina Faso and Mali, 18 is the legal age for marriage but the law is frequently ignored and in crisis situations, with schools closed, early marriage rises up the parental agenda. Girls appear to have little choice in the matter:

“ I am afraid that my parents will give my hand to a man whom I don't like and the risks associated to that. ”

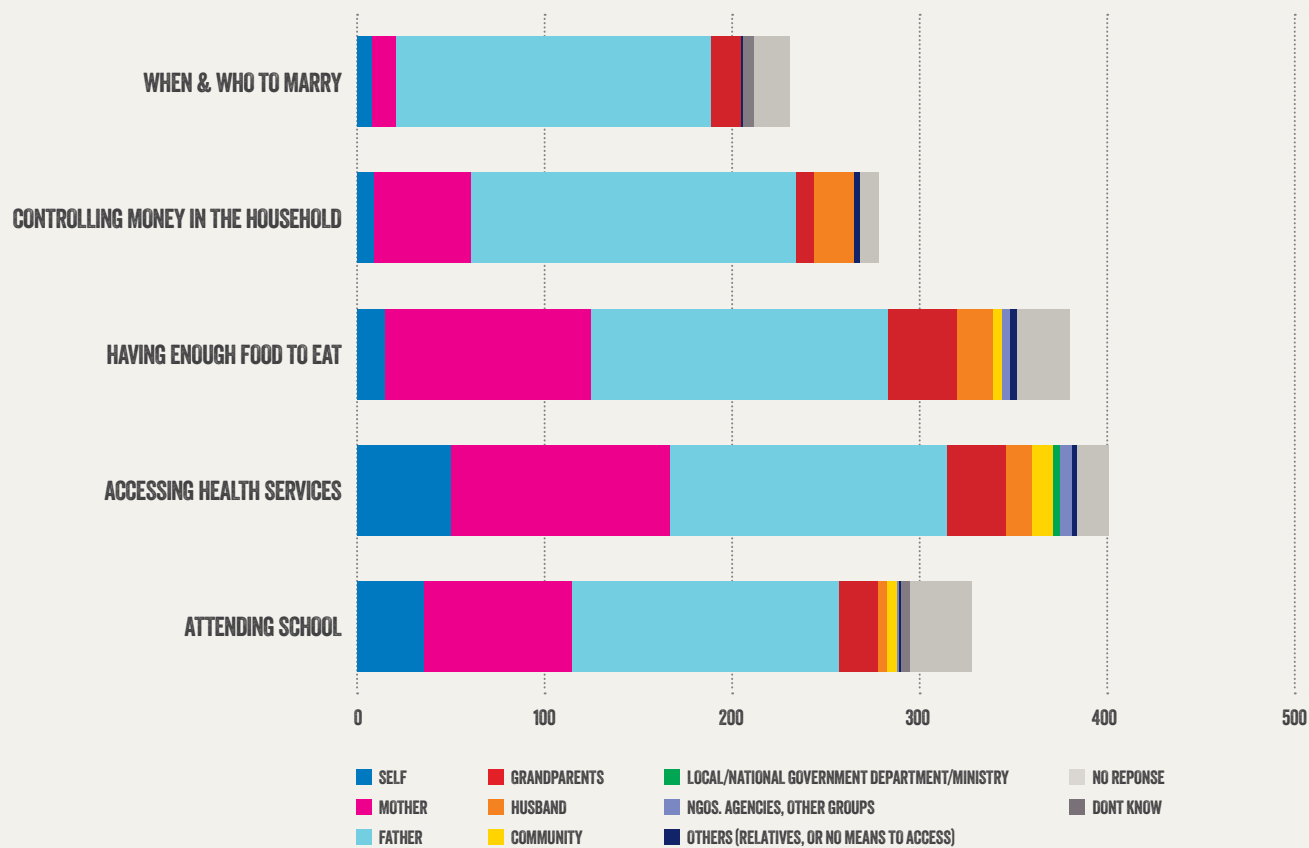
GIRL IN 15-19 FOCUS GROUP,  
GOURMA RHAROUS, MALI

In Mali, older adolescent girls raised early marriage as an issue and looked to their mothers for help although they were not sure it would be forthcoming. Lack of power and voice is not just a challenge for adolescents, older women explained that they too were not in a position to change things. They had to persuade their husbands to raise the issues they were concerned about and it was men who made the decisions. There are exceptions, a chief, in Gourma-Rharous, mentioned a women's group which takes care of girls' education: “Yesterday they held a meeting to raise awareness about family planning”.

Young women in Diré stressed that marriage should not necessarily mean the end of their education, although continuing is dependent on their husbands giving permission: “the authorities must think about the future of these girls who want to study.” However, they also highlighted that the authorities consider that a woman's place is at home, married, or preparing for marriage, and a girl's role is to take care of the household.

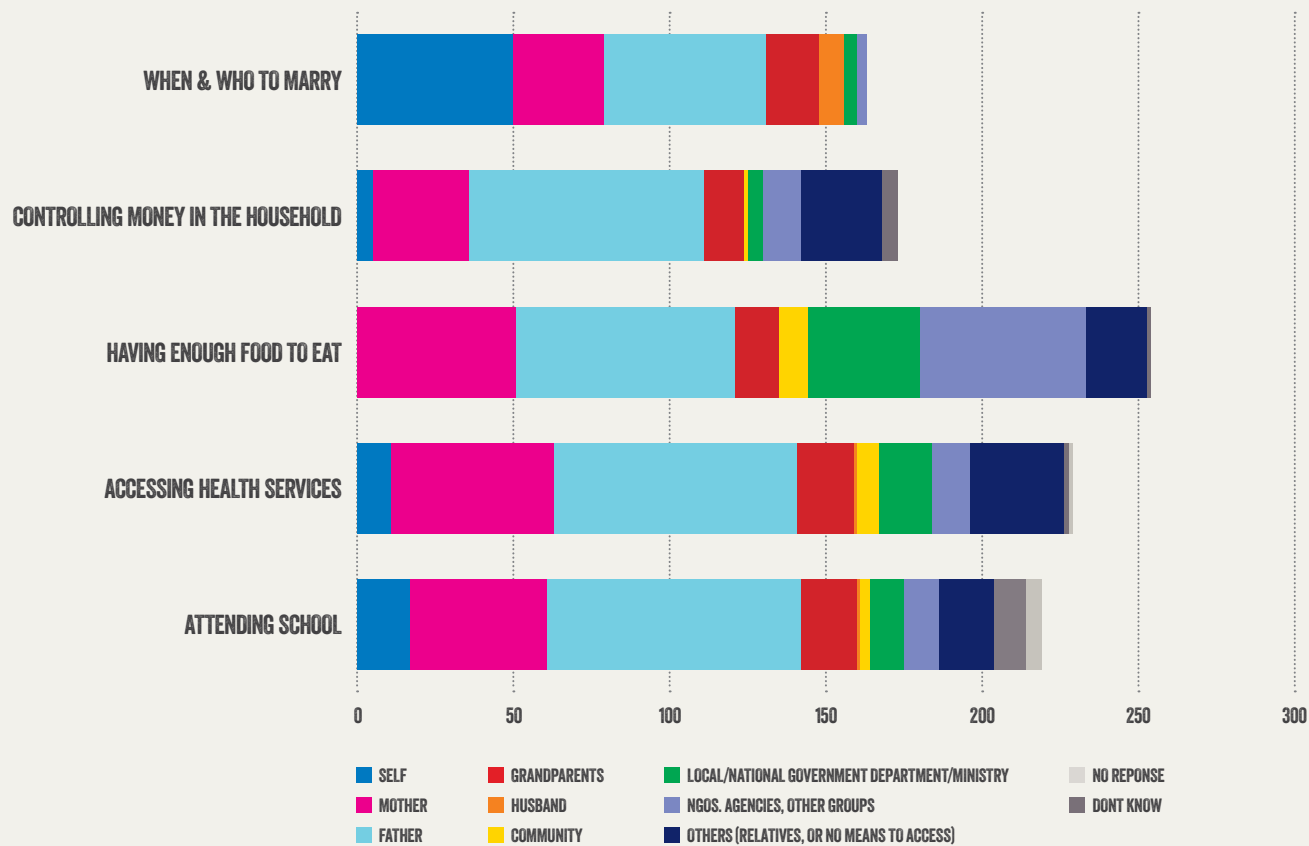
## WHO MAKES DECISIONS ABOUT GIRLS' LIVES

### IN MALI



## WHO MAKES DECISIONS ABOUT GIRLS' LIVES

### IN BURKINA FASO





Ammi, 12, learning at temporary school run by Plan International.  
(©Plan International)

## Obedient, respectful, invisible: the rules that govern girls' lives

“ Society’s view is that a girl’s place is in looking after the home. ”  
GIRL IN 15-19 FOCUS GROUP,  
DIRÉ, MALI

What is evident from the research in Burkina Faso and Mali, is that what happens to adolescent girls in times of crisis is, by and large, decided by the rules that have governed their communities and their daily lives for generations. Conflict, and the impact of increased poverty, makes things worse but the underlying gender inequality remains the same.

## Knowing your place

“ The difference is that here, boys do not have the culture to do household chores like girls whereas girls work in the fields AND do the household work. ”  
MAYOR, BURKINA FASO

Throughout the research the demarcations between what girls could and should do, compared to boys was abundantly clear. Girls noticed and spelled out the differences:

“ Well here I find that girls work better than boys at home and at school, it’s not the same thing. At home, the girls do the dishes, clean, cook, I can say that the girls do everything in the house. [Question: What about the boys?] It depends on the mother, if he is afraid of the mother he will go to work, if not ... ”  
GIRL, 15, INTERNALLY DISPLACED  
PERSON, TOUGAN, BURKINA FASO

Girls recognised that domestic duties often interfered with their studies but this is not how one village chief in Gourma Rharous viewed the situation: “Girls between 10 and 19 do almost nothing except household chores. Boys go to school; they farm and engage in small jobs.”

Other community leaders seem to be largely unaware of the realities of girls’ lives. In Tougan for instance, where all the older adolescents interviewed mentioned going to work in cities as maids during the school holidays, one community leader explained: “If they are not at school they are at home, [ ... ] they help with the work at home, in our community no girl leaves to look for livelihoods, they often trade alone or with someone to be paid to meet some of their needs and during the period of field work they ask to come and help the family in the fields.”

## Girls are timid ...

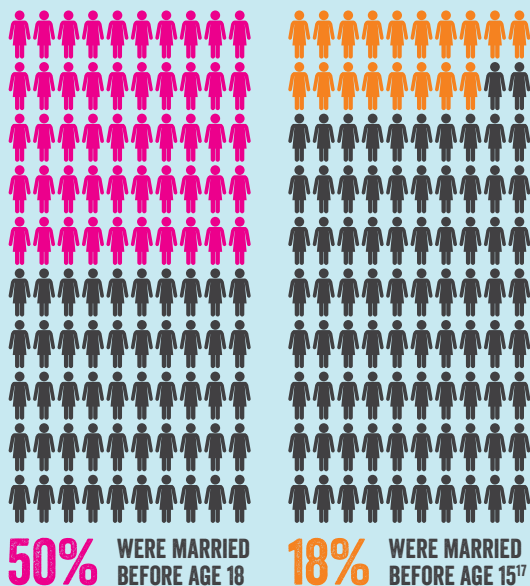
The qualities encouraged in girls tend to be obedience and respectfulness. A 17-year-old, considered that people like her, “because she respects her parents, she loves them, she helps them and obeys them.” The results of such expectations on girls’ behaviour are, ironically, not necessarily valued: “Girls are timid, one must awaken their mind and motivate them. They only take decisions with difficulty; they always stand behind decisions taken by their parents but boys react.” Village chief, Gourma Rharous, Mali.

Nonetheless, disobedience, particularly when it is associated with mixing with boys, is unanimously condemned by parents. A primary concern is pregnancy outside marriage and a father in Tougan pointed out that adolescent girls and boys going to school together, leads to girls getting pregnant and is not to be encouraged for this reason. A group of mothers in Tougan also explained that they saw the curfew as good for some girls: *"I think that some of them are 'focused' again because they used to wear extravagant clothes to go and do something other than study so I think it's good. For the ones who know what they want to do and were going out to study, it is a shame, but it's very good for those who were wandering about at night."*

**MALI HAS ONE THE HIGHEST RATES OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE WORLD**



WOMEN AGED 20 TO 24 YEARS



In times of crisis, limited access to quality education and employment opportunities makes a generally accepted practice like early and forced child marriage, even more prevalent. The impact on girls' future opportunities is far-reaching and although girls are often married off with a view to shielding them from violence,<sup>18</sup> research shows that it can increase their vulnerability to it.<sup>19</sup>

**I am against change ...**

It is clear from the research that many of the men and those in authority are reluctant to embrace any change that gives girls and young women more freedom:

**“Girls here tend to become modern; they look like girls from big cities. I am pessimistic, I am against change. Often, they are not respectful at all. To put girls into safety, one must be rigorous, advise them and monitor.”**  
**VILLAGE CHIEF, GOURMA RHAROUS, MALI**

The same attitudes emerged in Burkina Faso:

**“Why can't young girls do what they used to do before? But today they don't listen. They say these are things of the past and now they are in school ... if they could listen it's better. Before when you spoke once, they obeyed.”**  
**FATHER, TOUGAN, BURKINA FASO**

Another man noted: *"in our societies, a girl was not allowed to go to school, only boys went to school, girls did not have this right. But nowadays, they are free to do what they want about school. The health side also the access to the health centre, hospitals ..., the family planning in a way it is to keep them out of pregnancies but [it] has opened the way to delinquency."*

Not all adults are against change or girls' rights. One male town hall official in Mali was hopeful: *"I hope the state returns with basic services; peace and social cohesion, so that they can change girls' future positively. There needs first to be peace and stability in order to better provide services like school, health and protection for girls."*



*Djeba was a brilliant student who had big ambitions for her future but at 14 her family married her off to a man 17 years older.*  
 (©Plan International)



Sounounkou, 13, with her grandmother at their home in Koulikoro region, Mali.  
(©Plan International)

## GIRLS WANT TO EARN MONEY

Over a third of girls in Mali and Burkina Faso, 37 per cent and 34.4 per cent respectively, declared working to earn some money. The crisis is compromising their independence, as insecurity hinders their ability to trade.

**“** *It's difficult for the teenagers [to trade] because some of them used to go to the village markets because here there is not enough work. [ ... ] So, they are obliged to go out, and yet with the insecurity they can no longer do their trade in the villages.* **”**

**MOTHERS, TOUGAN, BURKINA FASO**

The risk of attacks disrupts local markets: often neither the women and girls who sell goods in the market, or their customers, are able to get there.

**“** *Our weekly market is on Sundays. But when there are attacks, nobody comes to us. We must wait for the situation to calm down. But until then, how do we survive?* **”**

**GIRL IN 15-19 FOCUS GROUP, GOURMA RHAROUS, MALI**

It is a key question and the lack of livelihoods puts further pressure on adolescent girls. It increases their risk of being sexually exploited and engaging in risky behaviour to put food on the table.

**“** *There are (girls) who do that. You don't like him but since you need money you follow him like that. Boys, no, there are no boys who do that.* **”**

**GIRL, 15, INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSON, TOUGAN, BURKINA FASO**

## Looking ahead

**“** *I want to finish my studies, to become a big boss and have cars and a phone.* **”**

**GIRL, 13, BANDIAGARA, MALI**

Many of the girls interviewed were ambitious for themselves and others. Another 13-year-old from Bandiagara told us: “I want to study to be a person with a big responsibility to take care of my village.” This desire to help was voiced by another girl in the same village who wants to: “become an entrepreneur woman in order to help my community”, and by two 15-year-old girls in Bankass who would like to be doctors, “to help my community”. Most girls declared that they want to be a doctor, a teacher or a successful businesswoman. In Gourma Rharous, where three girls explained that they want to study to become doctors, none of them go to school as a consequence of the crisis. The crisis is crippling their opportunities but girls are looking to the future, aspiring towards the sorts of careers where a high standard of education will be essential. These ambitions demonstrate the sheer resilience of youth and need to be supported.

## HOPE AND RESILIENCE: TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE

From day to day adolescent girls deal with the situation they are in. They look forward with hope to the future and they have suggestions and strategies to improve their lives today.



### Education

Girls want to go to school. **Education not only gives them the chance of a better job, it gives them access to crucial health information, provides peer support and gives them a degree of protection from early marriage and pregnancy.** They know that parental attitudes to them going to school will define their futures and stressed that parents must be educated too and made to understand the importance of letting girls go to school and finish their studies.



### Actors for change

Girls look to their parents, or their husbands, to support their education and they need the authorities to uphold the laws that should protect them. In some villages the mayor seemed to represent the main figure of power and source of support: *“Only the mayor can help us to have favourable living conditions.”* Girl, 14, Gourma Rharous. For information, girls rely also on NGOs and government-based social services like the Ministry of Social Action in Burkina Faso, where adolescent girls also sometimes go to report violence.



### Technology

In the absence of schools and access to health centres some girls are using smartphones and TV to find the information they need, and to keep in touch with the wider world. One internally displaced girl, in Tougan Burkina Faso, talked openly about the different contraceptives she was aware of: *“there are contraceptive methods such as the injection, the pill for not getting pregnant. We can get this information on TV.”* One 17-year-old in Gourma Rharous, explained that she learnt about sexual intercourse and contraception from her elder siblings or friends and through smartphones.



### Training and livelihood support

When asked what could be done to support girls in Gourma Rharous, a 14-year-old answered: *“Help us sell things. We have nothing to do and girls here are saving up to prepare for their marriage.”* Girls value entrepreneurship and an 18-year-old from the same area would like some support to open her own hair salon. What they need is training and guidance about business and marketing to help them sell their products. And the security to make it safe to do so.



### Earning a living

In many areas, girls work outside the home, usually as maids for rich families or by cooking and selling food - a key survival mechanism and one which points to girls' energy and capacity for independence.



*Abbiatou, 14, with the leaves she collects with her grandmother.*

(©Plan International)

“ *If there is food and money, we are no longer tired, this is what can improve our life.* ”

GIRL, IN 10-14 FOCUS GROUP,  
TOUGAN, BURKINA FASO

# CONCLUSION

It is very clear from the research that the issues raised are heavily interlinked. Neither girls' lives, nor the attitudes and actions of their families and communities can be neatly compartmentalised. The pressure put on families when water and food become scarce can bear down on underlying pre-existing gender discrimination. These and poverty pull girls out of school. Insecurity and conflict make earning a living even more difficult. Girls are at risk from violence both inside and outside the home and must struggle harder to avoid child marriage and early pregnancy.

All this strongly suggests that the responses drawn up by governments and the international humanitarian task forces should be similarly interconnected and coordinated. Change, if it is to be transformative and not a superficial plastering over of entrenched vulnerabilities, needs to be based, not only on the expertise of governments and outside agencies, but on the capacities and understanding of the communities involved. It follows that any action taken to improve the lives of girls in protracted crisis must include the interests, voices and experiences of adolescent girls themselves - who are so often silenced by societies which place little value on their abilities and circumscribe their opportunities.

“ Specifically, girls need confidence, reassurance and, above all, education in order to move forward. [ ... ] boys are freer in their actions and decisions. This is not the case with girls. ”

COMMUNITY LEADER,  
BURKINA FASO



Rokia, 14, washes dishes at her home in Koulikoro region, Mali.

(©Plan International)



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Adolescent girls need protection from pervasive insecurity and from gender-based violence, they also prioritise consultation, education, livelihood opportunities, access to health services and down to earth measures regarding food, water and bicycles to improve the grind of daily life. They are eminently practical and express a very concrete understanding of the impact of poverty on their lives and prospects. It is lack of money, and their own and their parents' limited opportunities to earn any, as well as the surrounding violence, that is framing their future:

“It is money and security that can improve people's lives. And if we have faucets it could help us.”

GIRL IN 10-14 FOCUS GROUP,  
TOUGAN, BURKINA FASO

The recommendations that follow draw on what adolescent girls have confirmed about their priorities and are firmly grounded in their rights, needs and the realities of their lives.



Yassa, 13, at her school  
in Koulikoro region, Mali.  
(©Plan International)

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## GIRLS WANT TO BE SAFE

### INSECURITY REMAINS THE MAIN CHALLENGE

- All parties must immediately ensure adherence to international humanitarian law and in particular governments of Sahel must honor commitments to United Nations Security Council resolutions and must uphold applicable international treaty obligations towards the prevention, protection and elimination of gender-based violence, sexual violence in conflict, and other forms of violence against girls and young women.
- Parties to conflict must allow humanitarian access to reach affected populations and work to prevent grave violations against children in conflict. The United Nations and its member states should provide sufficient resources for child protection in the region, particularly for child protection advisors in peacekeeping operations.
- All governments involved in the Sahel must prioritise measures to reduce insecurity and achieve sustainable peace for the people most affected, including adolescent girls. This means focusing efforts on access to services, rights and protections and addressing the root causes and drivers of conflict, including poor governance, political and economic instability, gender inequality and discrimination and lack of respect for human rights. Law enforcement and reporting mechanisms must be in place, as well as efforts to promote attitudinal and behavioural change at both family and community level to promote security for girls and young women in the widest sense, covering all aspects of their lives. Peace building initiatives, at all levels, must include the voices and interests of adolescent girls.

“These situations have affected me a lot, it has changed my life in terms of my education, and my security. These situations have had an impact on our whole community.”

GIRL, 13, BANDIAGARA, MALI

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Sarata, 14, and her mother live in a camp for people displaced by the conflict.

(©Plan International)



## GIRLS' WANT TO STAY AT SCHOOL

### ACCESS TO QUALITY AND SAFE EDUCATION AT ALL LEVELS MUST BE PRIORITISED

- Governments must take 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 which pledges to protect schools, students, teachers and universities from the worst effects of armed conflict. It is essential that this commitment recognises and addresses the gender-related dimensions of attacks on education: as schools close down girls are at greater risk of not being allowed to return to education.
- Donors must prioritise funding for girls' education in the Sahel. This includes targeting funding at measures to address gender related barriers to education. It is also important that education in emergencies interventions link to and provide a bridge into longer term education, particularly for girls who face gender related barriers to remaining in education following school closures: including making it easier for those with children or who are pregnant to return to education.
- Ministries of Education must ensure that national education plans are gender responsive and prioritise education for adolescent girls, particularly displaced girls. This might include: helping parents to support girls' education and understand its importance, making transport to and from school safe and available, employing technology - TV and smart phones – for educational purposes, making it affordable and ensuring that girls are able to use it.

“ There is poverty, which makes some unable to pay their school fees. Because of the terrorists others can't go to school. The school is far away, and some people don't have bicycles to go to school ... ”

GIRL IN 10-14 FOCUS GROUP,  
TOUGAN, BURKINA FASO

## GIRLS STRUGGLE TO STAY HEALTHY

### THEIR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH IS AT RISK

- Governments and humanitarian actors with the support of donors must increase provision of child and adolescent friendly, gender responsive mental health and psychosocial support services, ensuring that these are equally accessible for displaced and host communities. Wherever possible, psychosocial support services and interventions should be planned with input from adolescent girls and youth directly affected by the situation.
- Governments, with the support of the United Nations and donors must ensure access to emergency and basic health services, that include comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, supplies and information. Sexual and reproductive health services must be provided in consultation with adolescent girls, must be free and appropriate for their needs, including for girls who are survivors of sexual violence and girls who are married, pregnant or mothers.

“ Since the beginning of the crisis, people have lost their health. Some have fled and the mind is no longer at peace and it has become a disease. ”

GIRL IN 15-19 FOCUS GROUP,  
PISSILA, BURKINA FASO

## GIRLS WANT MORE SAY OVER THEIR LIVES

### ADOLESCENT GIRLS MUST HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO CONTRIBUTE TO DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

- All actors should promote and fully resource the **systematic participation of adolescent girls in all decisions that affect their lives**. This means they must be included in the design, implementation and evaluation of humanitarian and peacebuilding programmes and processes.
- **Adolescent girls' skills for leadership need to be developed**. Their contribution to their families and communities needs to be better acknowledged and their ability to contribute encouraged. This means providing safe spaces, forums and processes that involve and are led by adolescent girls and are sensitive to gender inequality and power dynamics: building family and community support for their engagement, and promoting attitudinal change to recognise, and not devalue, the rights of adolescent girls.

“ We are going to go out and then we are going to tell them [decision-makers] about our difficulties so that they can help us. ”

GIRL IN 15-19 FOCUS  
GROUP. TOUGAN,  
BURKINA FASO

## GIRLS ARE RESTRICTED BY THEIR COMMUNITIES' EXPECTATIONS

### HARMFUL SOCIAL AND GENDER NORMS STIFLE ADOLESCENT GIRLS' FREEDOMS

- All actors should recognise and take steps towards **addressing social norms and discrimination linked to gender and age**. There is a need to invest in and implement targeted and context specific programme interventions that focus on **identifying, challenging, and addressing gender-based discriminatory attitudes and harmful norms** and positively shape gender equality. This includes supporting attitudinal and behavioural change through community mobilisation and working with adolescent boys and men to challenge harmful masculinities and to engage them as advocates for girls' rights.
- Donors and humanitarian actors must ensure that funding and interventions designed to address girls' and young women's immediate humanitarian needs **links to and reinforces longer-term efforts to strengthen resilience and address root causes of gender inequality and gender-based violence**.

“ They consider a woman's place to be in the home, preparing to get married one day. ”

GIRL IN 15-19 FOCUS GROUP, DIRÉ, MALI

## GIRLS NEED ACCESS TO LIVELIHOODS

### THE ABILITY TO EARN SOME MONEY WAS HIGHLY PRIZED BY THE ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN THE STUDY

- Governments and the wider humanitarian community, with the support of donors must **prioritise adolescent girls' and young women's economic empowerment**, including access to livelihoods and income generating activities for young women affected by the crisis. Poverty and lack of livelihoods are among the root causes of the Sahel crisis, and **local and national governments must recognise** the importance of market trading and access to decent work as an essential part of protection for adolescent girls. Their absence exposes girls to risky behaviour and encourages migration.
- **All actors, including NGOs**, must support small businesses with grants and vocational training for adolescent girls should run alongside formal schooling.
- **Security forces must prioritise** keeping markets open and enabling traders to travel safely.

“ Above all my main wish is that this security crisis comes to an end very soon and, in the future, I want to become a woman entrepreneur so I can help my community. ”

GIRL IN 15-19 FOCUS GROUP, BANDIAGARA, MALI

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*Yassa, 13, with her grandmother at her home in Koulikoro region, Mali.*  
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**Cover photograph:** Rokia, 14, at her home in Koulikoro region, Mali. ©Plan International

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No photographs were taken during the course of this research.

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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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