INTRODUCTION

The crisis affecting the Lake Chad Basin is one of the most severe humanitarian emergencies in the world. More than 2.2 million people are currently displaced, over half of whom are children, and more than 10.7 million are in need of humanitarian assistance across North East Nigeria, Cameroon’s Far North, Western Chad and South East Niger. This protracted crisis has unfolded in a region beset by chronic fragility, where poverty, unemployment and a lack of prospects for young people fuel extremism and are compounded by environmental degradation and the impacts of climate change.

While all civilians across the region face multiple forms of insecurity, adolescent girls are impacted by this crisis in ways that are different from adolescent boys and from adult women, and in ways that are often overlooked by the humanitarian sector. General reporting on the crisis often conflates ‘women and girls’ or ‘young people’ together, which can obscure the sometimes stark variations in experience and capacity that both age and gender bring to different civilian constituencies. Sector specific programmes and funding often fail to address the complex, interrelated challenges that adolescent girls face.

In order to better understand the ways in which adolescent girls experience and navigate the crisis in the Lake Chad Basin, Plan International, in partnership with Monash University’s Gender, Peace and Security Centre (Monash GPS), conducted original research in sites across the affected regions of Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon. The study seeks to amplify adolescent girls’ voices and perceptions of the crisis and present their views on how the international community might respond and partner with them in addressing their concerns and consolidating their capacities. This briefing presents a selection of the findings from the study and the implications for practitioners, donors and policy makers.
MAIN FINDINGS

1. Adolescent girls experience and fear a wide spectrum of violence including conflict-related violence, community violence and domestic violence. Violence and fear infiltrates every part of their lives and limits the choices they make about where to go and what to do. Violence also affects girls’ access to other rights, including freedom of movement and access to education.

2. Child early and forced marriage (CEFM) is commonplace across all research sites. The practice is being fuelled by the crisis, deteriorating economic conditions, rising food insecurity as well as cultural expectations. CEFM and adolescent pregnancy significantly impacts girls’ current well-being and future prospects.

3. The economic crisis undermines the security and well-being of girls and their families. Economic deprivation is linked to girls’ inability to make decisions about their lives, needing to help bring in an income to the household, leaving school, being exposed to physical violence in the home. It also increases girls’ vulnerability to adopting negative coping mechanisms such as survival sex and increases the likelihood of being married at a younger age.

4. Adolescent girls face significant barriers to education, particularly secondary education. This is principally because of the burden of household chores and the costs associated with school but security conditions and the distance to school are also significant barriers to education for girls, as are CEFM and displacement.

5. Girls demonstrate agency, a desire to help others in their community and great entrepreneurial skills, all of which can help build their own capacity and that of their communities. They also demonstrate an understanding of and ability to articulate what would be required to improve their futures.

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.

ADOLESCENT GIRL, 16 YEARS, MORA, CAMEROON

SITES OF INSECURITY

Experiences of violence and insecurity
Throughout the research, adolescent girls described a wide spectrum of violence including conflict-related violence, community violence and domestic violence that impacts almost every aspect of their lives. Violence and fear also impacts girls’ access to other rights, including freedom of movement and access to education.

Almost a quarter of all girls surveyed reported having been physically assaulted over the last month. Across all research sites many adolescent girls reported feeling unsafe in their communities (particularly in Mubi, Nigeria, where most girls said they felt unsafe), and especially at night, fearing harassment and the presence of armed gangs. Girls also feared being kidnapped by such gangs.

Water scarcity is exposing girls to increasing insecurity. Adolescent girls are often responsible for collecting water, as well as food and firewood, often over long distances, putting them at further risk of harassment and physical violence.

Girls also reported feeling unsafe in their home, due to external threats as well as domestic violence; of those who said they had been assaulted in the last month, 60 percent occurred in the home. Feeling unsafe in the home was particularly pronounced among those who were displaced. Girls not living with their parents were also considered to be particularly vulnerable to violence in the home. Deteriorating economic conditions were blamed for a recent increase in violence at home, with frustration related to household economics reportedly leading some parents to abuse and mistreat their children. Many girls asked for humanitarian agencies to provide economic opportunities for families to address dire economic circumstances and food insecurity, as well as to help curb violence in the home.

The research also revealed that girls faced sexual harassment and sexual violence from many different sources. Just under one in ten girls surveyed reported having been sexually harassed in the last month, and many said they changed their behaviour and limited their movement in public spaces in response to harassment and abuse. Those that had experienced displacement or were living in camp contexts often had greater restrictions on their movement outside of the household. Street lights and increased presence
of security forces were mentioned by adolescent girls in some sites as mechanisms to support increased freedom of movement.

While few respondents were willing to talk about conflict-related sexual violence, some spoke of kidnapping and forced marriage perpetrated by armed groups. Others referred to the particular vulnerability of girls who work as domestic servants to sexual assault.

In several research sites, some respondents also spoke of girls being forced to have sexual relationships with men in order to survive. It was described by some girls as a negative coping mechanism in response to the insecurity and economic crisis, whilst others spoke of persistent poverty prior to the crisis driving ‘survival sex’. Many girls also spoke about the re-victimisation of survivors of sexual assault through stigmatisation or being forced to marry their attacker.

Child, early and forced marriage and adolescent pregnancy

Child early and forced marriage (CEFM) is commonplace across all research sites, with girls, as well as some parents and guardians, suggesting it is increasing as a result of the crisis, deteriorating economic conditions and rising food insecurity. Just over 15 percent of adolescent girls surveyed across all research sites were currently or had previously been married, with adolescent girls in Niger far more likely to be married - 48 percent of those surveyed in Niger aged 15-19 were currently or had previously been married.

Community expectations and attitudes also contributed to CEFM, alongside practical drivers of marriage. The cost of school fees and materials, closure of schools as well as the perception by some parents that marriage acts as a protective mechanism against the physical threat posed by armed groups, and the need for adolescent girls to provide household and care labour were all highlighted as driving rates of CEFM.

The majority of adolescent girls engaged in this study are clear that CEFM is a threat to their current well-being and future prospects. However, girls also overwhelmingly said that decision-making for marriage was almost invariably out of their hands and generally the responsibility of parents, particularly fathers.

CEFM is a significant barrier to girls accessing education, with girls forced to leave school to get married. The link between limited access to education and the prevalence of child marriage is evident across the Lake Chad Basin but nowhere more so than in Niger. In Niger, 81 percent of women aged 20-24 with no education and 63 percent with only primary education were married or in a union by the age of 18, compared to only 17 percent of women who completed secondary education or higher.3

CEFM also increases the likelihood of early pregnancy and thus the associated health risks; the fertility rate of adolescent girls in the countries of the Lake Chad Basin is on average 133 live births per 1,000 adolescent girls, while the Lake Chad Basin has one of the highest ratios of maternal deaths anywhere in the world at 773.4 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births.4

These risks were acknowledged by both adolescent girls and their parents and are a particular concern in light of the significant barriers adolescent girls face in realising their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). These barriers include a lack of available information on contraception and sexual health, inaccessible or inappropriate health services, and financial barriers. Across several of the sites, adolescent girls described how they found out about sexual and reproductive health from their husbands after they were married and that husbands remained the main source of information on contraception. Respondents in some sites also noted that lack of SRHR contributed to CEFM rates, with families marrying their daughters early as they feared the stigma of being pregnant outside of wedlock.

ECONOMIC INSECURITY AND LIVELIHOODS

There are limited opportunities for both formal and informal livelihoods across the Lake Chad Basin. The deteriorating economic situation is further constricting these opportunities, particularly for adolescent girls who have very limited access to the formal employment sector. Adolescent girls clearly linked both their own and their parents’ economic prospects with their ability to make
decisions about their lives, their physical safety and mental well-being, the likelihood of being able to go to school, and the prospect of being married at a young age. Parents and guardians also described how a lack of economic opportunities have a significant impact on family cohesion and relationships within the household, highlighting how children, including adolescent girls, may be mistreated or abused as a result.

There is no sufficient work opportunity for girls here in Kaleri.
COMMUNITY LEADER, KALERI, NIGERIA

Younger ones eat, older ones drink water and go to bed.
ADOLESCENT GIRL, 18 YEARS, NJIMTILLO, NIGERIA

Food insecurity has significantly increased as a result of violence associated with armed groups destroying access to farming, both as an income generation activity and for subsistence purposes. The majority of girls (62 percent) said they had gone to bed hungry at some point over the last month. It also means girls are more likely to engage in informal and unregulated labour to help meet the needs of the family.

LIMITED ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Adolescent girls face significant barriers to accessing and remaining in education, particularly secondary education. The burden of household chores and the costs associated with school were seen as particularly significant barriers to education, while security conditions and the distance needed to travel to school were also highlighted. CEFM is also a significant barrier to accessing education, with girls being forced to leave school to get married.

If there is money we further their education but if there is none then we marry them out after their secondary school.
COMMUNITY LEADER, KALERI, NIGERIA

Even going to school, we do that in fear.
ADOLESCENT GIRL, 16 YEARS, BAHLULI, NIGERIA

The transition from primary school or junior secondary school, which is often more accessible and more likely to be government-subsidised, to secondary education is a potential risk factor for adolescent girls. The research found that adolescent girls are far less likely to attend secondary school than primary school in almost all locations. The research sites in Niger saw the biggest drop off in attendance rates, with 66 percent of girls surveyed aged 10-14 years attending school, but just 29 percent of those aged 15-19 years attending. The low rates of secondary school attendance in these sites coincides with high rates of CEFM.

INTERSECTING RISKS

The findings from this study underscore that adolescent girls are not a homogenous group and do not have a single view or set of experiences in crisis contexts. A number of factors intersect with adolescent girls’ gender to heighten their vulnerability to particular risks.

Age:
Dividing adolescent girls and boys into two age brackets (10-14 and 15-19) during data collection and analysis allowed for further understanding of the intersection of age and gender in the experiences of adolescents. The findings confirmed that older adolescent girls were significantly more likely than younger girls to be at risk of CEFM, adolescent pregnancy and dropping out of school and more likely to feel the effects of food insecurity.

Experience of displacement:
The experience of displacement substantially increases the risks for adolescent girls, both during flight as well as in camps and informal settlements. The findings revealed that girls who have been displaced, both internally and across borders are particularly likely to fear physical violence, have limited access to education and feel less optimistic about their futures. Displacement also plays a significant role in determining access to resources and the humanitarian sector and likelihood of family separation.

Family separation:
Over 30 percent of girls surveyed had been separated from both parents, and findings revealed that family separation increases the likelihood of exposure to other harms and insecurities, including poverty, violence, limited livelihood opportunities and prospects as well as feelings of hopelessness. It was also recognised as impacting adolescent girls’ ability to attend school, as well as what age she would marry and whether she experienced abuse and mistreatment at home.
SITES OF RESILIENCE

Despite substantial and multiple insecurities, adolescent girls have developed coping mechanisms and strategies which help them to navigate the crisis and support others to do the same. They also have a lot to teach their families, communities and humanitarian and development actors engaged in building security and resilience – not least their ability to support each other and help others even amidst violence and insecurity, and after having suffered significant trauma and harm over sustained periods of time.

RESILIENCE, AGENCY AND ENTREPRENEURIALISM

While few girls believe they have the ability to shape their own lives, girls demonstrated agency, a desire to help others in their community and great entrepreneurial skills, all of which can help build their own capacity and that of their communities. Of particular note, although often overlooked, is that girls also demonstrated an understanding of and ability to articulate what would be required to improve their futures, which can be used to inform more responsive and, thus, effective programmatic interventions.

I’m proud when I sell a lot and I have money to help my mother.

ADOLESCENT GIRL, 13 YEARS, MINAWAO CAMP, CAMEROON

I am proud of being enrolled in school here in Kaleri. Its one thing I am always happy and proud of.

ADOLESCENT GIRL, 18 YEARS, KALERI, NIGERIA

The research has highlighted other sources of resilience and support for adolescent girls, notably community role models, female leaders and peers; safe spaces; and education and training.

Community role models, female leaders and peers: role models and female leaders in the community, as well as peer networks are a great source of support and inspiration for adolescent girls, helping to build the resilience of girls.

Safe space: safe spaces contribute to girls’ sense of well-being and improved security and are an invaluable source of support where many girls lack safety everywhere else in their everyday lives.

Education and skills needed for work: while access to education is compromised, when girls do receive education, it contributes significantly to girls’ resilience and their capacity to cope with the crisis. In particular, secondary and vocational education significantly improves well-being and optimism among girls.

CONCLUSION

The protracted crisis in the Lake Chad Basin presents adolescent girls with numerous challenges. Not least among these are the various and extensive forms of violence they are subject to in all areas of their life, within and outside the home, as well as heightened levels of harassment and other forms of insecurity. The economic crisis, and associated food and water crises, have exacerbated the insecurities that girls face, including sexual violence, CEFM (and the health risks associated with early pregnancy) and being forced to withdraw from school. Certain groups of girls are particularly vulnerable to these threats, including those separated from their parents.

Despite these threats, girls often demonstrate resilience, entrepreneurial skills, a commitment to hard work, a desire to help others, optimism for the future, insightfulness, and fortitude – all skills and attributes which are essential for any society if it hopes to transition towards a peaceful, prosperous and secure future. It is essential to the security and well-being of adolescent girls in the Lake Chad Basin that the specific security challenges they face and the specific needs they have are addressed, and that their capacity, knowledge and experiences inform policy and programmatic interventions. This will not only enhance the effectiveness of these programmes in meeting the needs of adolescent girls, it will also enable the girls to better contribute to a brighter future for their own families and communities.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers, donors and practitioners should:

• Fund and support programmes which respond to the needs of adolescent girls holistically with comprehensive, cross-sectoral programming that addresses both immediate life-saving needs, and promotes long-term resilience.

• 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, development and peacebuilding programmes and processes.

• Specifically tailor gender-based violence and child protection prevention and response programming interventions to address the needs of adolescent girls, including gender and age sensitive reporting and referral mechanisms. Targeted efforts should be made to address child, early and forced marriage in particular.

• Comprehensive SRHR services, supplies and information must be funded and provided in consultation with adolescent girls. Services must be appropriate to the needs of adolescent girls, including survivors of sexual violence and girls who are married, pregnant or mothers.

• Invest in and promote safe, inclusive, quality and gender-responsive education with a particular focus on adolescent girls’ education. Gender-related barriers to education faced by girls must be addressed and specific measures must be taken to support girls who have dropped out, or who are at risk of dropping out of education.

• Improve security and safety in communities and displacement camps, with a particular focus on the concerns and priorities of adolescent girls, in order to facilitate their freedom of movement, access to education and full participation in their communities.

• Support household economic security and livelihoods by rehabilitating communities’ economic and livelihood activities destroyed and degraded by the protracted crisis.

• Invest in adolescent girls’ economic empowerment with a particular focus on vocational skills acquisition and supporting their entrepreneurialism.

• 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.

ENDNOTES


2. The report was written by Hannah Jay and Eleanor Gordon. It was commissioned by Plan International’s Lake Chad Programme and undertaken in partnership with Monash University’s Gender, Peace and Security Centre (Monash GPS). The full report is available at: https://plan-international.org/girls-in-crisis


4. UNFPA (2017) Demographic Dynamics and the Crisis of Countries around Lake Chad, UNFPA.
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Monash Gender, Peace and Security is a group of policy and community engaged scholars whose research is focused in the field of gender, peace and security. We seek to use our research to inform scholarly debate, policy development and implementation, public understanding about the gendered politics of armed conflict and the search for peace.

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