**Human Rights Council, Social Forum**

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**16h30 – 17h15 Education in conflict and emergencies**

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**Speaking Notes**

***Safe and equal access to education for girls and young women in conflict and emergency settings***

*Alison,* ***girls and young women*** *are at* ***heightened risk*** *of danger during armed conflict and natural emergencies, meaning that they often cannot attend school and miss out on their education. Can you please tell us* ***how*** *we can* ***ensure******safe and equal access*** *to education for* ***girls and young women*** *in* ***conflict and emergency*** *settings?*

Thank you for the question, Your Excellency. Plan International is pleased to be on this panel today to share our experience working on the issue of education for girls and young women in conflict and emergency settings.

This is of course a very big question, we need to address it from various angles.

We need to start with the girls themselves: how they see the challenges that they face, and ways to address them. Plan International’s programmes and influencing are designed based on the views of children – particularly girls – and their communities.

From this we know that girls in crises want and value education. Plan International’s research[[1]](#footnote-1) has shown that adolescent girls see education as central to their future well-being. They are clear that education is key to empowering them with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to claim their rights, access jobs and so become more self-reliant and resilient for the future. **We need to work with girls and young women to find the best ways to make that happen**. Through discussions and other activities, we aim to understand their points of view – which are sometimes quite different from those of older people.

One example is child marriage. While parents and other community members affected by crisis report that early child marriage can be a necessary evil to cope with the situation, girls consulted are categorical that they shouldn’t have to be married before 18 years. They see education as a way to protect themselves against early marriage.

So in seeking to provide safe access to education for girls, it is very important to **work with parents, teachers, traditional and religious leaders, and boys and girls, to change perceptions about girls’ education**. That community participation and engagement is also critical to ensuring that education is contextually relevant, and sensitive to the different situations of girls and boys[[2]](#footnote-2). We should remember that the upheaval experienced during violent conflict and displacement can present opportunities to redress gender inequalities and set new precedents, as social structures are in flux. Education can therefore be gender transformative, particularly in post-crisis recovery.

Through local advocacy and relationship building, we can **change attitudes towards educational opportunities for girls**, in communities where harmful social norms limit girls’ learning. This is crucial to ensure that progress is sustained in the long-term.

Another key aspect is of course the **threat and reality of violence**, often sexually-related, that needs to be addressed for girls and young women to pursue education safely. This is highlighted as the top issue affecting their lives by girls in many contexts.

Plan International, with the support of the Norwegian government, has chosen to focus specifically on the Safe Schools Declaration, that we’ve heard about earlier, as a way to influence governments and armed groups to respect educational spaces, and to reduce their use for military purposes. We are currently work in 10 countries in West Africa, to encourage governments who have not yet signed the Declaration to do so, and to support those who have signed to make a reality of their commitment.

The most recent evidence from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack[[3]](#footnote-3) indicates that overall reported incidents of the military use of schools and universities declined between 2015 and 2018 in the 12 countries – almost all of them conflict-affected – that endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in 2015. It’s a slow and resource-intensive process, but it does bear fruit.

The Safe Schools Declaration is of course an example of **political engagement**, backed by resources, which is critical to underpinning access to safe, quality education. Education is a right for all children, girls and boys, and it is not suspended in a crisis situation. National governments and non-state authorities, must be supported to fulfil their responsibility as the duty bearers for human rights. Children’s right to a quality education, including those of refugee and internally displaced children, should be enshrined in national legislation, as recognised in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Plan International prioritises strong partnerships with governments, non state authorities (in certain civil conflicts) and civil society, wherever they are working, to help them fulfil their responsibility to support ongoing education for girls and boys who find themselves within their borders. Working across humanitarian and development settings, our long term development work addresses the root causes of vulnerability and gender inequality, for example through working with Ministries of Education on Gender Responsive Education Sector Planning. This longer-term sector wide approach underpins humanitarian response, when the same countries are hit by environmental disaster or tip into instability. The importance of Gender Responsive Education Sector Planning was recently endorsed by the G7 through the “Gender at the Center” Initiative, which looks to develop Gender Responsive Education Sector Plans in 8 crisis affected countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

This brings me back to what this all means for girls and boys, young women and men in practice in crisis situations. Both short-term measures and long-term solutions are required to ensure that they continue to have access to education. In the immediate aftermath of displacement or quick onset disaster, we need to make sure that children can **learn in a safe place, that meets their immediate education and well-being needs**. This normally includes psychosocial support, to help them deal with the upheaval and often psychological distress they have experienced, all too often including gender-based violence, to which girls and young women are especially vulnerable. We need to ensure that curricula, teaching methods and learning materials are non-discriminatory and gender responsive, and that classroom management is child-friendly, gender responsive and non-violent.

How can we do that? The **central role is played by teachers**, the majority of whom will have been affected by the crisis themselves. It is essential to support teachers to deal with their own stress, and to help them build the caring relationships with children that we know are the best protection against the long term effects of trauma. Women teachers can be particularly important for girls. There is growing evidence indicating that girls’ experience of education in crisis contexts, particularly where there is a high prevalence of GBV, can be improved where women teachers act as role models and understanding mentors.

**Training and ongoing support for teachers** is essential to enable them to meet these high expectations. The investment is well worth it. Strong relationships between teachers and learners are key to building resilience in the face of crisis. They are the foundation for core competencies such as confidence, curiosity, collaboration, problem-solving and teamwork, that all girls and boys need to face the future, particularly those in unstable contexts.

Beyond the provision of learning spaces and good teachers, **specific measures need be taken to ensure, for example, that pregnant girls can remain in school, and to support girls who have dropped out, or who are at risk of dropping out of education for other reasons**. We need to pay particular attention to the special needs and obligations of married girls and child mothers, for example through targeted outreach and support programmes, evening or part-time formal schooling, and vocational training opportunities. Plan has seen that girls dealing with the most challenging situations find hope for the future in education opportunities. They aspire to develop beyond the context and contribute to rebuilding their communities.

**Closing remarks**

So I’d like to conclude with a message of hope: if we can succeed in ensuring that girls and young women, alongside boys and young men, have access to quality education opportunities, we can contribute to longer term peace and stability. We can aim to start a virtuous cycle, whereby education can provide the basis for a route out of conflict and violence. Quality, inclusive education promotes social cohesion and gives girls and boys the tools they need to solve problems without the use of violence.It can help reduce stigma and intra-community tensions between refugees, IDPs and host communities. UNICEF suggests that equal access to education for both male and female students will decrease the likelihood of violent conflict by as much as 37 percent.[[4]](#footnote-4)

It is careful, long-term work, from the local to the global levels, that will eventually make a reality of commitments to provide safe and quality education for everyone, including girls and young women, affected by crisis and emergency.

1. Plan International (2018) Global Summary Report, Voices of Adolescent Girls in Crises [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.ungei.org/resources/files/Girls_in_Conflict_Review-Final-Web.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Practical impact of the Safe Schools Declaration; Fact Sheet*, GCPEA, 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. UNICEF. 2016. Education Inequality and Violent Conflict: Evidence and Policy Considerations. Weblink: <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/resource-epdc-brief-edu-inequality-violent-conflict.pdf> [Accessed: December 2017]. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)