I'm a teenager

What happened to my rights?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified on 20 November 1989 and has now been part of international law for 15 years. Yet many children who have grown up within the lifetime of the Convention have now reached their teenage years knowing little or nothing of what it is to have the protection and freedoms enshrined within its 54 articles.

It is likely that the majority of teenagers born on the day the Convention was ratified have not benefited from the promises it contains and know nothing about the rights it affords them.

Plan
Be a part of it.

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Foreword

Teenagers need to develop their own distinct identity and sense of uniqueness and individuality; increasingly separate themselves from their childhood dependence on others; develop meaningful relationships with those outside their family; crystallise their sexual identity and develop their capacity to relate well to others; gain confidence and skills to prepare for a career, economic independence and adult responsibilities; and, most importantly, fashion their values, beliefs and attitudes toward life in the future.

Teenagers today need more help than ever. Being expected to grow up quickly and getting to grips with the many changes of the turbulent teenage years can be exceedingly daunting. Peers, driven by the media, put enormous pressure on young people to wear particular clothes, use cosmetics, listen to the latest music, watch certain videos and generally behave in a manner beyond their years. Confidence levels and the grown-up personality are moulded in the teens, and setbacks around this time can seriously impact on self-esteem in later life. In a sense, the teenage years are no different than any others: every period of our life involves a quest for emotional survival. But the teen years are particularly difficult. For the first time, children are asked to define and prove themselves in the outside world, where competition is intense and the context can be anything but straightforward.

While hormonal changes certainly play a role in the emotional time that is adolescence, this is not likely the full explanation: biology and environment do an intricate dance, and it is often difficult to separate the two partners. In addition to physical and intellectual growth accompanying teenage years, there are also four psychological processes that account for the emotional growth of adolescents. First, is becoming less dependent on others and learning to think for themselves. Second, there is the process of becoming aware that the teenager is an individual, which can manifest itself as argumentativeness, silence or questioning as they discover who they are. Third, the process of developing their own uniqueness and individual character: choosing their own clothes, friends, music, hobbies and food and ways of talking. Last, but not least, combining together all the physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual growth teenagers have experienced throughout their lives into a relatively stable and enduring personality, ready to take their place in the community as responsible adults.

“The two most difficult times of life are when you are a teenager and when you have to care for a teenager.”[1] While there have always been problems of understanding between the generations, today these are aggravated by the indifference of generations towards one another. Teenagers are pulled in two directions at once in their young lives. Conformity, to fit in, is a motivating force. At the same time, there is an inter-generational pressure not to conform, not to follow those older than themselves, and certainly not follow their parents’ ways. In turn, parents and communities view teenagers’ ‘don’t care’ actions and words in terms of being awkward, disruptive and rebellious for the sake of it. So-called ‘teenage angst’ is not many parents’ favourite subject.

During childhood, most young people live in an environment which is protected and structured and where parents or other adult carers are in control. During adolescence, young people tend to have less

dependence on the protection of the family as they make new relationships and enter into situations which they have not previously encountered. Dealing with these new situations is part of the growing-up process[2]. As they pass through adolescence, alternating times of calm and conflict will arise. Each time a young person is prompted by a new opportunity to become more independent they may experience a surge of exhilaration and stimulation. Since they are facing a new and unfamiliar challenge, however, they may also feel overwhelmed, afraid and 'at risk'[3]. Confronting hazards is an essential part of the adolescent's journey towards adulthood. As an adult, the individual has to take responsibility for dealing with whatever situations and events present themselves; learning to do this is one of the adolescent's developmental tasks[4].

Simon Heap, Senior Policy Researcher, Plan
November 2004

Executive summary

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was ratified on 20 November 1989 and has now been part of international law for 15 years. Yet many children who have grown up within the lifetime of the CRC have now reached their teenage years knowing little or nothing of what it is to have the protection and freedoms enshrined within its 54 articles.

As this cohort of children reach their teenage years they face a new range of threats to their rights and wellbeing. Adolescents under the age of 18 are still children, and as such they are entitled to the protections offered by the CRC. But all too often teenagers are mistaken for, or treated as adults. Millions of teenagers in the developing world must grow up fast and take on roles and responsibilities far beyond their physical and emotional capacity. Millions of young girls become wives and mothers whilst they are still children. In Andhra Pradesh, India, the mean age for marriage for girls in rural areas is just 14.7 and studies reveal that between 20 and 30 per cent girls in India give birth by the time they are 17[1].

As a result of the AIDS pandemic more and more adolescents of both genders are taking on the role of carers to sick relatives and/or becoming breadwinners. Economic necessity means teenage children are often forced to work to support themselves and their families. It is estimated that between 100 and 150 million children live on the street, the majority of whom are adolescents. In sub-Saharan Africa AIDS has orphaned an estimated 12.3 million children[2], and this number is set to rise to 25 million by 2010[3]. As a result more and more teenagers are having to take on the role of parents and breadwinners for their younger siblings.

It is likely that the majority of teenagers born on the day the CRC was ratified have not benefited from the promises it contains and know nothing about the rights it affords them.

Children who survive the dangers of early childhood face new health risks as they enter their teenage years. They risk becoming infected with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. In some parts of Africa there is a widespread belief that HIV/AIDS can be cured by having sex with a virgin, but this is resulting in more and more teenage girls becoming infected. Teenage girls are becoming infected at five times the rate of teenage boys because of this practice as well as because of intergenerational marriage and relationships between older men and teenage girls.

Girls experiencing early pregnancy and childbirth risk severe complications or even death as a result of the stress on their immature bodies. Globally, girls aged 15-19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as women in their twenties. And girls aged 10-14 are five times as likely to die[4]. Save the Children estimates that 70,000 adolescent mothers die every year in the developing world because young girls are having children before they are physically ready for parenthood[5].

The social and economic pressures faced by teenagers lead many to resort to drug, alcohol, or substance abuse - often resulting in long-term addiction. Or they take health risks, such as smoking tobacco, that will affect their health in later life. In the US, the number of adolescents aged 12 to 17 receiving treatment for substance abuse rose consistently from 1992 to 2002. In 1992, adolescents represented six per cent of all treatment admissions. By 2002, this proportion had grown to nine per cent.

As children grow up they become more independent from parents. But they are still naïve and inexperienced, and can find it hard to adjust to the transition stages as they approach adulthood. Researchers in the US

have mapped the development of the brain from childhood to adulthood and found that it goes through profound changes during adolescence. The pace and magnitude of these changes show that the brain is still developing throughout the teenage years[6].

Many are recruited into organised crime, gang culture or dangerous employment. It is estimated that 246 million under-18s are engaged in child labour, and two-thirds of them – 171 million – are doing work that is hazardous, such as working with dangerous machinery or pesticides and chemicals[7]. Children can be involved in child labour from a very young age but the older and stronger they become the more likely it is that they will be put to work. The most common type of work is agriculture, followed by domestic work[8].

Teenagers are targeted by traffickers, drug dealers, and recruiters looking for child soldiers. Between 8 million and 20 million children, the majority of whom are likely to be teenagers, are reported to be involved in the worst forms of child labour: forced and bonded labour, armed conflict, prostitution and pornography, and trafficking[9].

Millions of adolescents leave home – either voluntarily or because they have no option – and take to the streets where they are even more vulnerable. If they transgress the law, adolescents are often denied the special treatment accorded to younger children. Many experience brutality at the hands of the criminal justice system with numerous teenage children incarcerated in adult detention facilities. More than a million children and teenagers across the world are locked up, the majority of them under arrest or awaiting trial.

However, although adolescents below 18 are still children, they are grown-up enough to be listened to and have the right to voice their opinions and influence decisions affecting their lives. Teenagers are making their views known - and expecting adults to take notice of them. Plan facilitates teenagers to speak out through a range of media projects. As well as giving teenagers a platform to express themselves to a wide audience, these programs provide training in broad non-vocational skills such as communication, teamwork, creativity, self-expression, and confidence. They also provide other children and teenagers as well as adults with information they would not otherwise receive and can influence change in their communities.

There is always hope for a better future. Children who are teenagers now can build a better future for themselves. And younger children can be afforded better protection when they reach adolescence. Positive things can and are being done to challenge the problems, not least by teenagers themselves. Teenagers are supporting themselves and their families. They are participating in educating their communities about children's rights, health – including HIV/AIDS, and non-violent solutions to conflict, to name but a few subjects. They are getting involved in community forums to influence decisions and bring about change for the better. Given the chance, teenagers are achieving their aspirations.

Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) promised children a better future. It has been signed by all but two of the world's countries. Thus world leaders have an obligation to children. The CRC is universal and indivisible. All children everywhere are entitled to its protection, but most are let down by the adults who should be ensuring that all the articles of the CRC are applied to all children without exception.

There are many threats to children's rights that the CRC has failed to eliminate. Millions of children have grown up and reached their teens since it was ratified 15 years ago. This report examines 15 of the greatest issues faced by children in their teenage years and looks at ways that teenagers themselves, with support from their communities, from Plan and other organisations, are working to realise their rights.

1. Sexual exploitation

There are three main inter-related forms of commercial sexual exploitation of teenagers. These are: prostitution, pornography, and trafficking for sexual purposes. According to the United Nations, child prostitution can be defined as: "the act of engaging or offering the services of a child to perform sexual acts for money or other consideration with that person or any other person."[1] Child pornography consists of material representation of children engaged in sexual acts, real or simulated, intended for the sexual gratification of the user. Sex trafficking is defined as: "...a pernicious form of slavery; it is the purchase of a body for sexual gratification and/or financial gain."[2]

Children of all ages have been found to be subjected to sexual exploitation. But the teenage years are a particularly vulnerable time because it is often easy for those exploiting them to lie about their age and claim that they are over 18. Moreover, it is relatively easy to get access to adolescents, when they are not being accompanied by an adult, and lure them into an exploitative situation. And parents often consent to their teenage children being taken by traffickers. This is either because they are duped into believing their son or daughter is being recruited for a respectable job or because they are so poor or in debt that they think they have no choice but to consent to anything that will help increase the family income.

It is difficult to know how many children are being exploited, as the shame, stigma, fear of reprisal and lack of belief in the authorities means that many do not report it. But estimates suggest that globally up to two million children suffer sexual exploitation every year, the majority of them girls[3]. The lack of accurate figures means it is of course hard to know whether the incidence of sexual exploitation of children is increasing or not. But various factors have certainly made teenage children more vulnerable: the erroneous belief that HIV/AIDS can be cured by having sex with a virgin; sex tourism which targets children; the growing use of the internet for child pornography; the increasingly international and organised nature of criminal networks; and the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. It is the children who are already marginalised - the poor, and the uneducated – who are most vulnerable to sexual exploitation because they and their families are the most desperate. Evidence suggests that, due to poverty, adolescents made decisions to work in the sex industry because they wanted to contribute to the family income and support sick or ageing relatives.

The effects of commercial sexual exploitation on teenagers include unwanted pregnancies, severe physical and psychological trauma including death, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and permanent psychological scars[4]. Children are beaten, kicked and raped by those who exploit them. They are more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases than adults, including HIV/AIDS. They are not in a position to demand safe sex and may not be educated about it either.

The campaigning organisation ECPAT[5] reports that the rate of HIV infection among prostituted Nigerian girls deported from Italy in 2003 was in excess of 50 per cent. According to one Cambodian non-governmental organisation, as many as 70 per cent of the girls rescued from brothels have been infected with HIV[6].

Plan's response

Plan, in association with ECPAT, is trying to tackle sexual exploitation. They have set up a project which, once it is up and running, will promote legal reform and improved law enforcement, raise awareness of commercial sexual exploitation of children, and build the capacity of local organisations to rehabilitate and reintegrate child victims[7] .

The psychological effects include guilt, shame, low-self-esteem, mistrust, stigma, nightmares and depression. Some turn to drink and drugs; some attempt suicide.

Prostitution and pornography violate the child's right to be protected from sexual exploitation and abuse. In the Mekong region of South East Asia, it is thought that about a third of all sex workers are aged between 12 and 17[8]. In Mexico, more than 16,000 children are working as prostitutes, with the highest numbers in tourist areas. In Lithuania, 20–50 per cent of prostitutes are believed to be minors, with some as young as 11[9]. Thirty per cent of those trafficked from Moldova are teenage girls trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation[10].


Panos/Shehzad Noorani

Demand for child sex workers can also increase when military personnel, peacekeeping forces and humanitarian staff are present. Vulnerable refugee children may be left with little other option than sex with military personnel or peacekeepers as a means of survival. For example, in 1992 in Mozambique, UN soldiers recruited girls as young as 12 into prostitution[11]. More recently the presence of NATO-led troops in Kosovo has caused an increase in the numbers of bars and nightclubs where girls as young as 16 are reportedly held captive and forced to sell sex to troops and businessmen[12]. A study by the UN on the sexual exploitation of children during armed conflict found that the arrival of peacekeeping troops was associated with a rapid rise in child prostitution in half of the countries studied[13].

The growth of internet use has fuelled the exploitation of children for pornography. In July 2004, 70 children were rescued from a pornography syndicate in Laguna in the Philippines. The following month UNICEF reported that child pornography in the Philippines was far more widespread than previously thought, and this is because of poverty, public acceptance of pornography and prostitution, lack of stringent laws, and technological advances which make pornography easier to produce and propagate[14].

Although the majority of victims of child sexual exploitation are female, boys also suffer. Abuse and exploitation of boys is even less reported than that of girls. In Sri Lanka, and according to statistics from UNICEF and the International Labour Organisation, there are between 5,000 and 30,000 Sri Lankan boys who are used by Western paedophile sex tourists[15]. In the Dominican Republic and Haiti, boys reportedly stay with adult male tourists on the beaches. Taboos about homosexuality mean that boys may not be able to admit even to themselves that they have been abused[16].

Estimates put the number of children being trafficked for use as cheap labour and prostitution at 1.2 million a year[17]. Girls as young as 13 are trafficked from Asia and Eastern Europe as "mail-order brides." Girls used as domestic workers are in danger of sexual abuse in the homes of their "employers." In Fiji, for example, UNICEF found that eight out of ten domestic workers reported sexual abuse by their employers[18]. The UN lists Mexico as the number one centre for the supply of young children to North America. The majority of these children are sent to international paedophile organisations and most over the age of 12 end up becoming prostitutes[19].

Porous borders and improved communications help the traffickers with their grim and lucrative work. For example, immigration controls at the Paraguay – Brazil border are very difficult to patrol, and children are reportedly trafficked in both directions across it. Officials do not always request identification papers from unaccompanied children or from adults traveling with young children. Girls are reportedly trafficked from Thailand to South Africa via Singapore, while children from several African nations are trafficked to South East Asia via South Africa[20]. In Greece, studies have indicated that more than 40 per cent of the children working as prostitutes are from neighbouring or regional countries such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Albania and Iraq[21].

Children who are 'rescued' from sexual exploitation abroad continue to suffer. They can be treated as criminals who are in breach of laws against prostitution and illegal immigration, and can be imprisoned before being sent to their country of origin. Once back in their country of origin, they may be punished again, this time according to the laws and policies of their own countries for emigrating illegally.

Plan's response

Roslyn's story

Roslyn, aged 16, had been promised work as a model in Japan. She was being recruited in the Philippines with nine other underage 'models' when they were stopped at Port Matnog by security guards who suspected they were minors being trafficked. Roslyn was then taken to a half-way house supported by Plan in Port Matnog. She was provided with food, shelter and counselling there before going back to her family. She said that she had had no idea what being a model entailed, and knew only that the cost of her travel to Japan would be deducted from her wages when she started work[22]. "Matnog is considered to be a strategic location for traffickers attempting to move their human cargo across land routes," explains Cathy Seco from Plan. "Some 5,000 people disembark at the port every day, providing useful cover for the illegitimate trade. The halfway house here represents another line of defence against the people and organisations who exploit the very young and underage for profit."

Manmaya's story

Manmaya, from Nepal, was married in 1994 at the age of 15. When her family had not heard from her or her husband for several years, her community attempted to find her. They learned she had been taken to a brothel in India and that her husband was in prison in Kathmandu. But the police could not help, because there were no documents proving Manmaya's existence. She had not received a marriage certificate because she was underage when she married, and for the same reason did not qualify for a citizenship certificate or passport. Registration of births had only been introduced after she was born[23].

Phina's story

Phina, 13, from Uganda, was sexually abused. Her father Mukasa could not prove she was underage because she had not been registered at birth, so there was no case. "If only I had registered my daughter at birth, I would have won the case. I would have protected her," said Mukasa[24]. In many countries, sex with a girl under 16, whether she gives consent or not, is regarded as rape. But without a birth certificate to show she is underage, it is very hard to get a conviction.

One of the most important steps in the fight against sexual exploitation is ensuring that every child is registered, as Manmaya and Phina's stories UNICEF illustrate. Plan and UNICEF have undertaken a number of birth registration campaigns in countries many children lack birth certificates to prove their age. If children are not officially registered, they are not only without proper protection from exploitation, but may grow up without access to civil rights and a formal education. In Senegal, Plan is working with a local organisation to get 5,000 street children enrolled. In Togo, Plan's work in 26 communities means that 14,000 children now have a birth certificate[25].

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 34 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says that states must prevent children being coerced into unlawful sexual activity and the exploitative use of children in prostitution or pornography or other unlawful sexual practices. Article 35 says states must prevent the abduction, sale or trafficking of children.

An Optional Protocol specifically addressing the commercial sexual exploitation of children was adopted in 2000 and came into force in 2002[26]. For it to be effective, governments will have to act at national level. Governments need to enact and enforce laws that punish those who traffic and sexually exploit children, and they need to give humanitarian visas or grant refugee status to trafficked children. They need to cooperate internationally to prevent trafficking and deal with trafficked children more humanely.

2. Violence

Violence against teenagers takes a horrifying number of forms. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says that children should be protected from violence. Yet it occurs in the home, at school, in institutions such as orphanages, on the street, and in detention. A lot of violence takes place behind closed doors, and teenagers do not report it for fear of retribution. If the adult committing violence is someone whom they should have a right to trust: a parent, carer, or teacher, it is even harder for them to speak out. Cultures of violence that are deeply entrenched in many societies mean that neither the adolescent nor abuser see anything wrong; they see violence as a normal and deserved punishment, and the boy or girl feels guilty for whatever they have done to 'deserve' this treatment.

Factors contributing towards violence are complex. They include the absence of a primary caregiver, normalisation of violence in the media, unequal gender relations, social norms that do not respect teenagers' rights, drugs, alcohol, crime, and cultures of impunity. The growing availability of firearms, in both urban and rural areas around the world, increases the lethality of violence. When guns are present, teenagers are more likely to die from violence inflicted on them.

Plan's response

Plan's work focuses on violence within the family, and providing young people with an alternative to gang life. In Cali, Colombia, where community leaders were concerned at youth gangs and children being mistreated at home, Plan has trained 100 local people to reach out to 1,000 families and help them to improve intra-family relations and create an environment in which children are not subjected to violence.

Plan also supports a peace program for teenagers aged 13 to 18 in Colombia. As well as recreational, artistic, sporting and social activities to encourage their creativity and lessen the chances of them drifting into drug use, the project includes personal growth and peaceful coexistence workshops. Youths involved in violent gangs have achieved a peace agreement and have been offered alternative ways of spending their spare time.

Even if young people are not physically injured, violence against them has a devastating long-term effect and can derail their development. It can destroy their ability to learn or willingness to go to school, and can prompt them to run away from home, which increases the risk to them. It ruins their self-confidence and can undermine their ability to be good parents in the future. Girls and boys who experience violence lose their trust in people, and have an increased risk of depression and suicide in later life[1].

Violence against children of all ages in the home occurs across the world. The World Health Organization estimates that 40 million children below the age of 15 suffer from abuse and neglect, and require health and social care. According to UNICEF, a survey in Egypt showed 37 per cent of children reporting being beaten or tied up by their parents, and 26 per cent reporting injuries such as fractures, loss of consciousness or permanent disability as a result of this. In India, 36 per cent of mothers told interviewers in a survey that they had hit their children with an object of some sort within the last six months. Ten per cent said they had kicked their child; 29 per cent had pulled their child's hair; 28 per cent had hit the child with their knuckles; and three per cent said they had punished their child by putting hot peppers in their mouth[2].

The problem is the widespread social acceptance of corporal punishment as a form of discipline. When teenagers from Freetown in Sierra Leone were encouraged to speak out about their concerns and

desires as part of a children's forum, several were worried about the way parents treat children. Zainab, 15, said: "The thing that I want to tell the parents that to stop flogging the children and then to send them in the streets, to go and beg money in the street. I want the President to tell the parents to stop beating the children... I want the President to tell the parents that this is not good."

Victor Brott

Plan's response

In El Salvador, Plan has been working on a project to promote self-esteem in girls and to campaign against child abuse. The program includes 'Schools for Parents' in which adults can learn about children's rights and their own obligations towards children. It also runs Committees for Non-Violence made up of representatives from schools, police, judicial institutions and community leaders, which develop community activities promoting non-violence within families.

Corporal punishment

Teenagers also experience violence at school, which interferes with their education and may put them off getting one altogether. Research by Human Rights Watch showed that for many children around the world, violence was a regular part of being at school. In some cases, school officials routinely used corporal punishment to keep discipline in the classroom and to punish children for poor grades. In other countries, authorities did not intervene to protect minority children from harassment and attacks by other students.

In Kenya it found that teachers were slapping, kicking, pinching, caning, or even beating children for such minor infractions as being late, talking in class, wearing dirty uniforms, or being unable to answer a question[3]. And in South Africa the organisation documented disturbing levels of sexual violence against girls in school, with harassment, abuse and rape committed by both teachers and male students across three provinces. "I left [school] because I was raped by two guys in my class who were supposedly my friends," said WH, 13[4].

Adolescents are both perpetrators and victims of violence. Teenagers, boys in particular, who suffer violence, are more likely to mete it out themselves. A study in the US found that an abused or neglected child is 53 per cent more likely to be arrested as a juvenile, 38 per cent more likely to be arrested as an adult, and 38 per cent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime[5].

A culture of violence is learnt at home and through the media. Boys are socialised to think that anger and aggression are appropriate male emotions, while it is more socially acceptable for girls to be weak and passive. Cultures of masculinity also tell boys that it is a 'male thing' to carry weapons. Surveys from nine Caribbean countries found that a fifth of boys had taken a weapon to school in the previous month, and nearly as many had been in a fight using weapons[6].

Gang violence

Another way in which adolescents suffer and inflict violence is when they get involved with street gangs. Street children, school drop-outs and adolescents living in poverty, are attracted to gang life, which offers an identity and a sense of power. Across the cities of Central America, gang culture is strong. It has been estimated that at least 25,000 children belong to gangs in El Salvador alone[7]. These countries have relatively recently emerged from vicious wars which fostered a culture of violence. Now the gangs have been boosted since the US changed its laws so that immigrants who have committed crimes are deported: this means that those who had spent time in the gangs of Los Angeles have now taken their violent allegiances back with them.

Once teenagers and children are involved it is very hard to get out, and they are rapidly drawn into violent crime. Public opinion is horrified by the rise of gangs across Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. So there is wide support for the harsh measures that governments take against them, with teenagers put in prison because of their tattoos, and killings by police and private death squads attracting little official condemnation.

In May this year 105 prisoners, mostly young gang members with the Mara Salvatrucha gang, were locked into a prison in the city of San Pedro Sula in Honduras and burned alive[8]. (See Section 3 On the street)

Darwin, from Tegucigalpa in Honduras, was good at school and wanted to become a doctor. But when he was 14, he joined the 18th Street gang, which is one of the two most powerful gangs. “Darwin met a girl from the 18th Street gang at a party. The gang was a new world. They promised clothes, shoes, gold chains, and the chance to be a leader, a boss. But it was all a lie. When you start, the gang gives you a better identity, but when you try to get out you can't. He had "18" tattooed on his chin, and his arms were full of tattoos,” said his mother Sara. Darwin started to get in trouble with the police, and was arrested several times. He died when he was 16, two days after being arrested and reportedly beaten by the police. His mother believes the police executed him, and that witnesses are too afraid to speak out. She herself has reported receiving death threats[9].

In areas of high urban violence, poor teenagers and those on the streets are at risk of involvement in violent drug factions. In 2002, it was estimated that more than half of the 10,000 employees of the drug gangs in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro were under the age of 18. The level of armed violence there is so high that the lives of adolescents involved in the militarised drug gangs are closer to those of child soldiers than gang members. In some periods, there have been more firearms deaths in Rio de Janeiro city than in gun battles in Colombia, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, or Israel. Between 1987 and 2001, eight times as many minors died from firearms injuries in Rio de Janeiro, than Israeli and Palestinian children died in the conflict over the Occupied Territories during the same period[10].

Young people are particularly vulnerable to gun culture if they have grown up knowing no other way. The proliferation of guns across conflict and non-conflict zones, cities and countryside, continues. The phenomenon of youth gangs in El Salvador has spilled over into schools, with coalitions of high schools fighting each other, using knives and modified belt buckles but also guns[11]. In South Africa, boys told interviewers that they felt girls prefer men who have guns. However, girls in the same community said that boys used guns to coerce them into sexual relations. Male violence against girls and women is reinforced by cultures of weaponry; the gun becomes an extension of male power[12]. Wherever guns are present, in the home, at school or on the street, violence is more likely to be lethal.


Panos/Paul Smith

In 2003 the UN Secretary-General appointed an independent expert to lead a global study on violence against children, looking into its prevalence, nature and causes, with recommendations for action. Non-governmental organisations are contributing to the study, which will take children’s views into account[13].

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 19

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

Article 39

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.

3. On the street

There may be between 100 million and 150 million street children in the world, many of whom are in their teens. It is hard to make accurate assessments of numbers, since street children are a highly mobile population. Some attend school for part of the year but may be on the streets at other times. The majority are still in periodic touch with their families, or may be working on the street by the day but returning home at night. But for others the street is their home as well as their livelihood. Street children scavenge, beg, hawk goods, steal, or resort to prostitution in order to survive.

Plan's response

Plan has a two-pronged approach to working with street children: preventative work, addressing the long-term needs of poor families and face-to-face work with those children already on the streets.

Plan believes that the most important thing is to talk to young people first. Many children working or living on the street are highly resourceful and independent, and may be sceptical of adults and what they can do for them.

Street children are losing out on an education, are at risk of violence, poor health and drug addiction, and in some countries are brutally targeted by police and vigilantes. Authorities may view them as criminals, and the public view of them is characterised by fear and suspicion. They are seen as a blight, and in many countries there is public support for getting them off the street, even if this involves violent police action and sometimes killing them.

CASP Deli

Teenagers may have left home because of abuse at home, family break-up, or family economic difficulties. But there are also broader trends, such as the rapid urbanisation across Latin America, Africa and Asia, as the impact of the 1990s structural adjustment programs created a widening gap between rich and poor and forced the poorest people from the countryside into the cities to seek work.

Plan's response

Plan's preventative work addresses both the reasons that force children to turn to the streets, such as poverty, abuse or natural disaster, and the factors that make the street a more attractive alternative. For children from a poverty-stricken rural household who have lost parents to AIDS, the streets of large towns may seem to offer more economic opportunities. For children abused at home they might seem like a safer option. Plan works on improving household income to try to ensure that no family is so poor that children are forced to work in an environment detrimental to their well-being.

Zerihun Mammo of the Ethiopian Teenagers' Forum says that young people must "show how children can find solutions to their own problems. Adults cannot speak for us. They see things from the outside. We see things from the inside. We young people can discuss among ourselves and ... identify our problems and speak about them and suggest solutions."[1]

Zerihun describes how a 16 year-old acquaintance ended up on the streets: "The thing I saw that really touched my heart was this young girl. Ten years ago she came to Addis Ababa from Gondar. She started working in someone's home, and when she was 15 the man who heads the household raped her. When she got pregnant he chased her out of the house and she started living on the street. She gave birth to his child. Three months after she had his child she was raped again. She is 16 years old and when we saw her it was only four days since she had given birth [again], and she had a one year and two months old baby. I was very sad when I saw her."[2]

In the Indonesian city of Makassar, the number of children on the streets since the economic crisis of 1997 has increased. They congregate at the municipal rubbish dump, scavenging for scraps. Most have dropped out of school to work as scavengers in order to support their families, and are pleased to be working in order to bring money in. Even as humanitarian organisations like Plan run programs to encourage a few hundred children at a time to return to formal school, the number of scavenger children in Makassar continues to increase each year. They are extremely vulnerable to infectious diseases such as diarrhoea, worms, scabies and respiratory infections, suffer from poor nutrition, and are at risk of accidents as they forage over the dumpsite. Teenagers who hang out at the dump make dates with rubbish truck drivers and have unsafe sex[3].

Plan's response

In Indonesia, Plan works with children who make a living scavenging materials for recycling, shining shoes, selling newspapers or singing for money. It is providing education at the children's work places, so that their parents do not see education as a threat to family income, as well as healthcare, savings services, and recreation and play facilities. The program was designed in collaboration with the children themselves, making use of their knowledge and experience, which makes it more likely to be successful in the long term. The emphasis on understanding the lives of the children has led to the recruitment of street educators, sometimes peers of the street children.

The AIDS pandemic is contributing to the number of children having to find a living on the streets. In Tanzania, for example, where about a million people have already died from AIDS, there is an enormous burden on the survivors. Many carers are too old, or young, or ill themselves to look after orphaned children. Children orphaned by AIDS may be shunned by relatives and communities. If they lose their father first, inheritance laws prevent their mother inheriting the land, with disastrous economic consequences for the family. Consequently, running away from home to look for work on urban streets is seen as a potential survival strategy[4].

Vietnamese children from rural communities in Thanh Hoa and Hung Yen may travel large distances to Hanoi in search of work to support their families. The numbers are increasing: between 1997 and 1999 there was a 64 per cent increase in child migrants into Hanoi. Plan works with these communities to minimise the need for children to leave their family home and earn additional income in potentially exploitative and threatening environments. Plan supports credit and saving facilities, food security activities, and family counselling on the long-term benefits of education for children.

Plan's response

In Vietnam, Doan lived rough on the streets of several cities, ending up in Hanoi. "When I felt hungry I would beg for food, and when I felt sleepy I would sleep under any bridge or in a corner of a market. One time, I was forced by older kids to steal a motorbike and was caught by the police."

At other times when Doan was caught by the police he was sent to a correctional school or drop-in centre, where he struggled to comply with their strict rules after living independently on the street, and often ran away.

A counsellor from Plan's Street and Working Children Project made contact with Doan five years ago, when he was 16, and encouraged him to pursue vocational training to build a better life for himself. Doan was sponsored to attend a training course as a stone carver. He is now off the streets and earning enough money to send some home to his father and stepmother.

"Like other Vietnamese workers, every day I work eight hours starting from eight in the morning till twelve with a siesta of two hours and four hours of work in the afternoon. I am very busy now but I like the work very much. I am proud of my work – I have become a stone artisan. My dream now is to save up enough money to buy a small house and get married in the future."

In Nepal, the number of children making a living on the streets of Kathmandu has increased dramatically in the past 30 years, and is now in the thousands. Although some are as young as seven or eight, the average age is 13. The majority are boys; vulnerable girls are more likely to have been married early or trafficked or sexually exploited away from the public eye. The majority of street children in Kathmandu come from poor rural families, or from families where the parents do several low income jobs such as construction labour, driving, or tailoring. Most of the street children had been in school at some point, but had dropped out before learning to read or count. Only 37 per cent of street children in one survey could recognise the Nepali alphabet or write their own name[5].

Not only do street children have to find a way to make a living. They also have to face hostility from the public, and from police forces, private security forces and vigilantes who abuse and even murder them. Human Rights Watch describes how they are arbitrarily detained simply for being homeless, or charged with vague offences such as loitering or vagrancy. Worse, they are tortured or beaten by police and often held for long periods in poor conditions. Girls may be sexually abused, coerced into sexual acts, or raped by police.

In the last few years Human Rights Watch has reported pervasive police violence against street children in Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Bulgaria, Kenya and India. With few people to advocate on their behalf, street children's only option is to complain to the police, and face the threat of reprisal. Meanwhile authorities do little to investigate allegations of police violence and so the culture of impunity continues[6].

Plan's response

Internationally, Plan is an advocate for street children, ensuring that their issues and interests are represented on the world stage. For example, Plan works with other agencies as a member of the Consortium for Street Children in West Africa, which organises a series of regional forums to promote and protect the rights of street children.

Amnesty International reports that since February 2003, nearly 700 children and youths have been murdered in Honduras alone. The government has admitted that police officers have been involved in many of the killings, yet only two policemen have so far been convicted[7]. Between 1998 and 2002 the organisation says that more than 1,500 children and youths were killed in Honduras. Thirteen per cent of these deaths were in the context of gang warfare (see Section 2 Violence) but an alarming 22 per cent were reported to have involved police. Nearly all the victims were children and young people living in poverty on the margins of society[8].

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges governments to protect those aged under 18 "from economic exploitation, and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. Children should not work too long hours and not too hard work." It also has articles prohibiting slavery and trafficking.

The International Labour Organisation has passed two conventions on child labour:

Convention 138, adopted in 1973, sets a number of minimum ages depending on the type of employment or work. The first principle is that the minimum age should not be less than the age for completing compulsory schooling and in no event less than age 15. For countries whose economic and educational facilities are insufficiently developed, the age can be set initially at 14. The second principle is that a higher minimum age, of not less than 18, should be set for hazardous work. The types of employment or work deemed to be hazardous shall be determined by national laws or regulations or by the competent authority, leaving it to the individual countries to determine the content of these activities. In the case of light work, the minimum age can be set at 13 years, or 12 years where the economy and educational facilities are insufficiently developed.

Convention 182, adopted in 1999, calls for the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour: all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage, serfdom and forced or compulsory labour; forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; use of a child for prostitution, production of pornography or pornographic performances; use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs; and, work which is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

4. Crime and punishment

More than a million children and teenagers across the world are locked up, the majority of them under arrest or awaiting trial. Young offenders continue to be treated and prosecuted as adults. This is despite the fact that it has been proved that children and adolescents under the age of 18 do not have fully developed reasoning faculties and therefore cannot be held to the same standards as adults. In some countries it is common practice for children convicted of non-violent offences, such as theft, to be given long sentences rather than the rehabilitation and counselling that would give them a better chance of not returning to crime.

A significant number of teenagers behind bars have not even committed a criminal offence, but have been locked up for 'status offences' – which means offences that would not incur legal penalties if committed by an adult – such as truancy, begging, vagrancy and alcohol use[1].

Juveniles tried at adult courts are more likely to return to crime than those tried in a juvenile system [2] according to studies in the US. Yet teenagers continue to be tried in adult courts, and to be given long sentences in adult jails that do not have the staff or infrastructure to deal with the different needs of teenagers – in contravention of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Plan's response

Even if attempts are made to establish the age of a suspect, if the child does not have a birth certificate to prove their age, they may be treated as an adult. The birth registration programs that Plan supports are therefore a priority. The Third Asia Regional Conference on Birth Registration in 2003 heard the example of a 17 year-old sentenced to the death penalty. His lawyers were attempting to get relief for him under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, he faced difficulty in getting justice because he could not prove his exact date of birth due to the absence of a birth certificate[3].

Marginalised, runaways, street children, and children living in poverty are the adolescents most likely to commit crimes. Other risk factors include child abuse and family breakup, parental attitudes that condone law-breaking behaviour, academic failure, truancy and dropping out of school. Because they are still developing, locking teenagers up tends to be counterproductive as a means to combat crime. But far less money is spent on preventing delinquency in these at-risk groups than on locking up youths.

Teenagers might be rounded up by the police and punished, simply for being on the streets (see Section 3 On the street). In Central America, the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have recently been enacting harsh legislation to combat youth violence: the mano dura (iron hand) approach, which gives the police broad powers to detain children and youths based on appearance (particularly tattoos) and who they are with. In July 2004, Panama's minister of justice suggested that Panama should withdraw from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which would leave children at risk of long prison sentences and even the death penalty. The move was rejected by Panama's parliament. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has already called on El Salvador to repeal its anti-gang legislation because it has led to police abuses of children, according to Human Rights Watch[4].

Plan's response

Plan supports a programme in El Salvador to reach out to youth at risk of falling into crime. Teenagers in rural areas face a lack of opportunities; many drop out of school because their families can't afford to keep them there. They are then at risk of getting involved with criminal gangs. The AGAPE Association, a local organisation working with youth at risk, runs informal vocational courses for teenagers including carpentry, dressmaking and breadmaking.

Serious emotional difficulties are common amongst teenagers who are sent to prison. And in many countries they experience significant decline in their physical health, making their successful reintegration back into society even more difficult and unlikely. Teenagers suffer inhumane conditions in detention – overcrowding, cold, inadequate food, lice-ridden and insufficient beds, poor sanitation facilities and no exercise. As a result they develop skin disorders, chronic diarrhoea, respiratory illnesses and dental decay. They may be kept in solitary confinement for long periods. Physical abuse and violent interrogation at arrest or during detention cause broken bones, broken eardrums and bruises. Young people are often exposed the risk of sexual abuse in prison, particularly when they are locked up with adults. Parents are commonly denied visitation rights and are often not informed of a child's whereabouts. Children lose out on their education, which also increases the likelihood of a return to crime once they are out.

Plan's response

In Indonesia, Plan is working in the children's section of Tangerang prison in Jakarta to help and educate jail staff in providing health services and informal education. Juvenile offenders also produce a magazine twice a month with poems, articles, drawings, jokes and reflections so that the children and teenagers can express themselves and their hopes for the future.

This year, Plan has also begun to offer legal assistance to children, and a hotline with counselling services where children can get information or file complaints.

An investigation by Human Rights Watch in northern Brazil found that police were routinely beating children when they arrested them, often in police stations where they were permitted to hold them for up to five days. The investigation found that children were then incarcerated in detention centres where they were deprived of their human rights. They suffered further violence and beatings from the state military police who control security at detention centres, as well as violence from other youths. They were locked up in cells for long periods at a time, losing out on education and denied access to medical care. Girls had even less opportunity than boys for exercise and recreation. Human Rights Watch said that during a disturbance at a facility in the state of Pará, military police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at youths, causing burns, blisters, cuts and bruises[5].

In 2003 Amnesty International reported that young offenders in the Philippines were physically ill-treated at the time of or immediately following arrest. One youth offender reported that he was "physically beaten by the police because they were forcing me to admit to the shooting..." and that he was "treated like punching bags, hit with fists, kicked and beaten." Another youth said he was beaten by those who arrested him. Once in detention several of the youth offenders reported actual or fear of ill-treatment from adult detainees with whom they were imprisoned. One said: "I thought I myself was going to get killed because there were fights among all of the inmates and each had sharp weapons." Another reported: "I was put in a cell together with the older inmates. When I was still new there, they touched me sexually and when I resisted, they punched me."[6]

It is not just in the developing world that adolescents are abused and suffer poor conditions in detention. Children seeking asylum or immigrating illegally may also be arrested and held in detention for months or years. Unaccompanied immigrant children detained at borders in the United States, Australia, Hong Kong, Japan and the UK are routinely placed in detention centres or prisons that also house adults convicted of criminal offences[7]. In the US, there is strong evidence of racial bias in police and judicial treatment of juveniles. African Americans, for example, make up only 15 per cent of all US youths between the ages of 10 and 17, yet they make up 30 per cent of youths arrested from that age group, and 50 per cent of the juvenile cases transferred to the criminal court[8].

It was reported in 1999 that children held in the Baltimore City Detention Centre in the US endured particularly grim conditions, confined to poorly lit cells crawling with cockroaches and rodents. Violence in the jail was rampant, with frequent fights leading to lengthy "lock downs," during which entire sections were restricted to their cells, sometimes for weeks at a time. There was almost no counselling for juvenile detainees, despite the fact that children held in adult jails are as much as eight times more likely to commit suicide than those held in juvenile detention centres[9].

Panos/Andrew Testa

Teenage death sentences are not unknown. These particular young offenders in the Philippines were under sentence of death, despite the prohibition in both domestic law and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to which the Philippines is party[10]. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children and teenagers who were under 18 at the time of the offence cannot be sentenced to or suffer the death penalty. Most of the world agrees. Yet it still occurs: in the US, Iran, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. According to Human Rights Watch, since 2000 there has been one execution of a juvenile in the DRC, two in Iran, and nine in the US[11].

Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in 2002 that: "The overwhelming international consensus that the death penalty should not apply to juvenile offenders stems from the recognition that young persons, because of their immaturity, may not fully comprehend the consequences of their actions and should therefore benefit from less severe sanctions than adults. More importantly, it reflects the firm belief that young persons are more susceptible to change, and thus have a greater potential for rehabilitation than adults."[12]

Corporal punishment

Teenagers also suffer corporal punishment. In Nigeria in 2001, a teenage mother was whipped by officials for having sex outside marriage, although an appeal against her conviction and sentence was pending. Bariya, in her early teens, was sentenced by an Islamic court in the northern state of Zamfara[13].

Conflict

During war, child soldiers and civilian children accused of committing war crimes are often incarcerated along with adult soldiers. Six years after the genocide in Rwanda, for example, 4,454 children were in prison awaiting resolution of their case. More than 450 of these children had been formally cleared of any involvement in the genocide[14].

There is an existing body of international legislation on protecting children's rights when in custody. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibits capital punishment and life imprisonment without the possibility of release for youths who were under 18 at the time of the crime. It also includes the right to be kept separately from adults because of the risk of abuse. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights also prohibits the death penalty for under-18s[15]. Other standards include the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (the Beijing Rules)[16] and the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty[17].

But as we have seen, these international standards continue to be breached. Lack of political will means that either they are ignored, or there are insufficient national safeguards in place to make sure the standards are enforced. In the Philippines, for example, there is no requirement in the justice system to establish whether a suspect is a minor. This means that children may be detained and treated as adults until they are brought before a court[18].

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

States Parties shall ensure that:

(a) No child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for offences committed by persons below eighteen years of age;

(b) No child shall be deprived of his or her liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily. The arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law and shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time;

(c) Every child deprived of liberty shall be treated with humanity and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person, and in a manner which takes into account the needs of persons of his or her age. In particular, every child deprived of liberty shall be separated from adults unless it is considered in the child's best interest not to do so and shall have the right to maintain contact with his or her family through correspondence and visits, save in exceptional circumstances;

(d) Every child deprived of his or her liberty shall have the right to prompt access to legal and other appropriate assistance, as well as the right to challenge the legality of the deprivation of his or her liberty before a court or other competent, independent and impartial authority, and to a prompt decision on any such action.

Article 3

1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Article 38

1. States Parties undertake to respect and to ensure respect for rules of international humanitarian law applicable to them in armed conflicts, which are relevant to the child.

Article 40

1. States Parties recognise the right of every child alleged as, accused of, or recognised as having infringed the penal law to be treated in a manner consistent with the promotion of the child's sense of dignity and worth, which reinforces the child's respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of others and which takes into account the child's age and the desirability of promoting the child's reintegration and the child's assuming a constructive role in society.

2. To this end, and having regard to the relevant provisions of international instruments, States Parties shall, in particular, ensure that:

(a) No child shall be alleged as, be accused of, or recognised as having infringed the penal law by reason of acts or omissions that were not prohibited by national or international law at the time they were committed;

(b) Every child alleged as or accused of having infringed the penal law has at least the following guarantees:

(i) To be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law;

(ii) To be informed promptly and directly of the charges against him or her, and, if appropriate, through his or her parents or legal guardians and to have legal or other appropriate assistance in the preparation and presentation of his or her defence;

(iii) To have the matter determined without delay by a competent, independent and impartial authority or judicial body in a fair hearing according to law, in the presence of legal or other appropriate assistance and, unless it is considered not to be in the best interest of the child, in particular, taking into account his or her age or situation, his or her parents or legal guardians;

(iv) Not to be compelled to give testimony or to confess guilt; to examine or have examined adverse witnesses and to obtain the participation and examination of witnesses on his or her behalf under conditions of equality;

(v) If considered to have infringed the penal law, to have this decision and any measures imposed in consequence thereof reviewed by a higher competent, independent and impartial authority or judicial body according to law;

(vi) To have the free assistance of an interpreter if the child cannot understand or speak the language used;

(vii) To have his or her privacy fully respected at all stages of the proceedings.

3. States Parties shall seek to promote the establishment of laws, procedures, authorities and institutions specifically applicable to children alleged as, accused of, or recognised as having infringed the penal law, and, in particular:

(a) The establishment of a minimum age below which children shall be presumed not to have the capacity to infringe the penal law;

(b) Whenever appropriate and desirable, measures for dealing with such children without resorting to judicial proceedings, providing that human rights and legal safeguards are fully respected.

4. A variety of dispositions, such as care, guidance and supervision orders; counselling; probation; foster care; education and vocational training programmes and other alternatives to institutional care shall be available to ensure that children are dealt with in a manner appropriate to their well-being and proportionate both to their circumstances and the offence.

5. Bullying and punishment

Violence directed at young people and violence by young people is an issue of concern in both developed and developing countries[1]. Young people themselves regularly identify violence as an issue, particularly violence in school which can include corporal punishment, bullying, discrimination and sexual abuse.

Young people's lack of power and generally low social status in society, as well as the classroom, makes boys and girls particularly vulnerable to violence. Schooling is commonly authoritarian in nature and a key element of this is the perceived right of teachers to punish in order to maintain control and order[2].

Similarly, gender violence and inequality predicated on traditional social and cultural assumptions of male authority over females is replicated in the classroom. This results in women and young girls being particularly at risk from sexual abuse[3].

School-based violence is reinforced by the fact that teachers often lack accountability towards their students. Even if governments have made legal provisions for tackling the issue, these are usually broad and open to interpretation. Furthermore, laws may be contradictory or not rigorously enforced[4].

Corporal punishment

Corporal punishment is a common phenomenon in schools internationally. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that corporal punishment remains legal in at least 65 countries[5], despite the fact that it directly contravenes the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The term 'corporal punishment' means to inflict punishment on the body. It includes a wide variety of actions such as hitting, slapping, spanking, punching, kicking, pinching, shaking, shoving and choking as well as the use of a wide variety of objects such as wooden paddles, belts, sticks, pins and hands. Corporal punishment may also take the form of painful body postures caused by being placed in an enclosed space, use of electric shocks, excessive exercise drills and the prevention of performing bodily functions[6].

Although corporal punishment affects both boys and girls, a study of corporal punishment in schools in South Asia suggests that some young people suffer a greater risk of corporal punishment than others due to their ethnic, family or class background. Children with disabilities are found to be at even greater risk[7].

Corporal punishment is a humiliating and degrading act of violence which has both physical and psychological affects on young people[8]. Beating a youngster causes pain, injury, humiliation, guilt, anxiety, helplessness, anger, vindictiveness and a sense of low self-worth. It can also increase vulnerability to depression. At its most extreme, corporal punishment may lead young people to commit suicide.

Young people subjected to repeated violence may exhibit dysfunctional behaviour such as poor communication. When driven by fear, children learn simply to please the teacher and may not acquire the skills and knowledge they need for their development. They are adverse to taking risks and being creative[9].

Plan's response

Nepal

Children who participated in Plan Nepal's Children's Consultation raised the issue of corporal punishment which is common practice in schools. Plan Nepal is exploring the possibility of advocacy activity against corporal punishment at the local and national levels with other like minded non-governmental organisations.

Sri Lanka

"I do not like going to school because my teacher hit me in the presence of girls."

This comment was made during a Children's Consultation by Plan Sri Lanka to mark Children's Day.

Working in collaboration with The National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), Plan staff analysed the issue of corporal punishment and took the first step of working on a strategy to initiate a multi-media campaign against corporal punishment through print, billboards, radio and television. This was aimed at a number of target groups including schools and school teachers.

Plan Sri Lanka will continue to work with the NCPA, schools, parents and communities to study this issue in depth so that long-term interventions can be developed in order to challenge adult attitudes toward discipline and corporal punishment.

Indonesia

The Children's Council, facilitated by Plan Indonesia in Makassar, works in collaboration with a local non-governmental organisation and a group of journalists. The objective of the Council is to create awareness of and advocate for children's rights. One topic that the members have engaged with is child protection law in schools.

Talking about his participation in the Council, Ucok said:

"Through the Children's Council we want to socialise the law on child protection at all levels of communities, especially to the schools, so there will be no more child violations at schools."[10]

In addition, continuous humiliation can result in young people being too scared to go to school – a place where they are meant to feel safe and secure[11]. Not only do those youngsters subject to physical harm live in constant fear, but so too do those children who witness others being beaten, especially if punishment is inconsistently given and its reason is not understood[12]. Fear of school contributes significantly to young people dropping out of education, denying them their right to learn and realise their full potential.

Advocates of corporal punishment in schools believe that young people are better controlled, respect and appreciate authority, develop better social skills as well as improved moral character and learn to better discipline themselves[13]. However, strong and consistent research evidence shows that physical punishment and the deliberate humiliation of children are significantly linked with the development of violent attitudes and actions in later life[14].

Plan's response

Plan Togo is using a manual entitled 'Alternatives to Violence' with child-to-child school clubs in an effort to reduce violence and to prepare children to manage conflict situations. A project for girls' education is also being initiated and this will help young people develop drama and theatre against violence, based on their own school and household survey findings.

Indeed acts of violence by young people in school are on the increase and are directed both at fellow students and at teachers. In the US, for example, two teenage assailants took their own lives after shooting twelve of their fellow students and a teacher[15]. In Germany, teenagers were jailed for torturing a classmate for months and posting film clips of the abuse on the internet[16] whilst, in Japan, a 12-year-old girl was stabbed in the neck and killed by an 11 year-old classmate[17].

Guns

A UNECSO study on gangs and drug trafficking in or near Brazilian schools found that four per cent of students surveyed said that they had or have had a firearm and 70 per cent of these (almost 130,000 students) reported that these weapons were for use in schools. Some nine per cent of the students said they knew where, and from whom, arms could be bought and 55 per cent of these said that getting hold of a weapon was easy[18].

Panos/Paul Smith

Plan's response

Brazil

In Brazil the proportion of the population most exposed to violence are youths aged 15–24 years old[19]. In light of this, young people participating in a media project supported by Plan Brazil produced a video on violence in schools.

Explaining about the video at the 2004 Fourth International Summit on Media for Children and Adolescents, 16 year-old Ana Claudia said:

"I learned a lot about the problems caused by dealers selling drugs to children in the school and why there is so much violence. The film has changed things. Now there is less violence because the school has better security and the police protect us."[20]

Haiti

Plan Haiti supported a teenager-led survey on how the CRC is being violated in their communities. Violence at school scored highest in nearly every community. Based on this finding, the teenagers developed their own campaign against violence in school.

A Human Rights Watch study of corporal punishment in Kenya concluded that violence in a school helps to breed violence. As one head teacher said, "One thing leads to another; show me a school that has excessive corporal punishment and I'll show you a school that has bullying."[21]

Bullying

Like corporal punishment, bullying takes many forms including physical violence, threats, name-calling and sarcasm, spreading rumours, persistent teasing and exclusion from a group, torment, ridicule, humiliation and abusive comments[22]. Again, the effects of bullying can be both physical and psychological.

Teacher-student bullying and student-student bullying are common problems in schools around the world. In the UK, for instance, a telephone child-counselling charity reports that bullying is the single biggest reason for youngsters contacting the helpline. About half the young people who call about bullying say they are verbally abused, whilst a third speaks of being punched, kicked or pushed.

My father registered me at a municipal school. But when I went there, the headmistress despised the displaced kids. She kept telling us we were dirty and unkempt... the other kids did not even allow us to sit on the benches and were pushing us off onto the ground instead[23].

Fourteen year-old Umaru told Plan Sierra Leone about her experience of school before the civil war and joining the Rapid Education Programme facilitated by Plan, the Ministry of Education and the Federation of African Women Educationalists (FAWE).

Young people who are bullied can be discriminated against for having the 'wrong' coloured hair, eyes or skin, for wearing the 'wrong' clothes, for speaking another language or for being in a wheelchair[24]. Children in developing countries also identify poverty as a reason for being bullied, with research suggesting that social interactions and relationships with others can be far more important to young people than having to go without food or other commodities[25].

Another growing reason for being bullied is the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. Children, whose parents are ill because of HIV/AIDS, or those who have been orphaned by the disease, may be rejected by their friends and schoolmates. As one 16 year-old South African girl put it: "They treat you badly. You don't feel like walking in the street, they give you names. They whisper when you pass. They take it that when one person in the house is sick, all of you in that house are sick."[26]

Sexuality

Attention is also increasingly focusing on homophobic bullying – abuse based on sexuality[27]. This is frequently predicated on the belief that girls and boys must conform to rigid rules of conduct on appearance based on their gender. Youth who violate these rules run the risk of punishment at the hands of their peers and by adults[28].

Researchers studying lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in the US, Australia, Canada, France, New Zealand and the UK, among other countries, have reached similar conclusions about the pervasiveness of antigay violence in schools.

One study in the US, for example, found that lesbian, gay and bisexual youth were nearly three times more likely than their peers to have been involved in at least one physical fight at school, three times more likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon at school and nearly four times more likely to skip school because they felt unsafe[29].

Such abuse hampers students' ability to get an education and takes a tremendous toll on their emotional well-being. Perhaps because so many lesbian, gay, bisexual youth experience abuses on a daily basis, these young people are also more likely than their heterosexual peers to use alcohol or other drugs, engage in risky sexual behaviours or to run away from home[30].

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is usually only one aspect of a wider problem of school-based violence which includes corporal punishment and bullying[31]. Yet, whilst corporal punishment and bullying generally affects both boys and girls, sexual violence is overwhelmingly carried out against girl students by male students and teachers[32].

As such, sexual harassment poses a powerful barrier to girls' and young women's access to education and their ability to benefit from it. It is a powerful factor both in influencing parents to keep girls out of school and for girls themselves avoiding school. In addition to suffering physical and psychological trauma, young girls also face the consequences of unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion and sexually transmitted infections, including the HIV virus[33].

The problem of sexual abuse is particularly well documented in Africa where sexual harassment of female students by males is common practice and often ignored. In some ways it is seen as 'normal' and inevitable. Research in a number of junior secondary schools in Ghana, Malawi and Zimbabwe suggests that this is because, by failing to clamp down on sexual abuse and aggressive behaviour, schools send out the message that it is acceptable[34].

Students generally believe that it is better to stay quiet rather than risk reporting the abuse to a teacher. This is not surprising given that teachers themselves are often implicated. As well as feeling that nothing will be done, students may also have strong feelings of shame and blame, a fear of not being believed or a fear of the consequences of speaking up[35]. This may help explain why, although some incidences of sexual harassment towards males have been reported, there are knowledge gaps around homophobia and gender-based violence affecting boys[36].

Plan's response

Schools should play an important role in securing the rights of youth to participation, free association and expression. However, students internationally tend to have very little control over what they learn, when and where. They also have little if no say in how their schools are organised.

However, encouraging the active participation of young people in the running of their school can help to tackle problems of violence within it. Research shows that:

- School rules compiled in partnership with students are more likely to be relevant, understood and adhered to
- Young people who are encouraged to express their opinions and to be assertive will be more likely to have higher self-esteem and move from a position of confidence. As a consequence, they will be better equipped to deal with abusive, threatening or unfair situations because they will be in a better position to seek advice and exit a harmful situation when necessary
- Participation that involves a diversity of young people can build a sense of belonging, solidarity, justice and responsibility, caring for people in need and sensitivity towards people who are different[37]

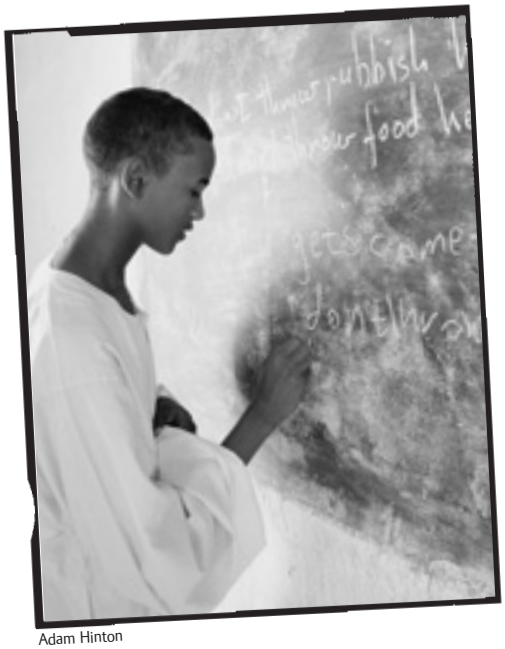
A cornerstone of Plan's Child Centred Community Development approach is the active participation of children and their communities in their own development.

This may take the form of a Children's Club, for example, through which young people can protect themselves from violence by providing each other with peer support and by learning and practicing skills such as self-organisation, negotiation and conflict resolution.

Plan's 'School Improvement Program' (SIP) is designed so that students are empowered to become active participants in their own learning and not just passive recipients. Their involvement in all aspects of school life means that solutions can be sought through dialogue with their family, community and teachers in a process that listens to and respects everyone's views.

SIP is made up of the following core elements:

- Ensuring teachers are competent and motivated
- Promoting active learning methods
- Promoting the active participation of children and parents in school governance
- Ensuring a safe, sound and effective learning environment
- Establishing a relevant curriculum
- Ensuring that children are properly prepared for school
- Ensuring empowered and supportive school leaders
- Advocating for supportive supervision from the government



Adam Hinton

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 19

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child

Article 28.2

To ensure that school discipline is administered "in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in Conformity with the Convention"

6. Conflict

Modern conflict kills far more civilians than combatants. Ninety per cent of the casualties of conflict may now be civilians – and half of those are under the age of 18[1]. They are caught in crossfire, deliberately killed and injured, forced from their homes, sexually assaulted, forced to fight for armed groups, lose their parents, lose out on their education, and lose their hope for the future.

UNICEF estimates that 20 million children under the age of 18 have been forced to flee their homes because of conflict and human rights violations, and are living as refugees in neighbouring countries or are internally displaced within their own national borders. Over the last decade, another two million children have died as a direct result of armed conflict and at least six million children have been permanently disabled or seriously injured. Another million children have been orphaned or separated from their families. And between 8,000 and 10,000 children are killed or maimed by landmines every year[2].

In the Darfur region of Sudan during 2004, teenage children have been killed, had to watch their parents being killed, have been driven from their homes, separated from their families, raped and sexually abused, and denied access to humanitarian relief, healthcare and education. Half a million children are thought to be living in camps with inadequate facilities, and girls are now pregnant as a result of being raped. There is evidence of boys aged 14 to 18 being taken to fight or support armed groups[3].

Plan's response

At the time of writing Plan was joining with UNICEF to provide essential life-saving services to the displaced peoples in Darfur, such as toilet facilities, access to safe water and education.

The special needs of adolescents are frequently neglected during conflict and in its aftermath. Small children are especially vulnerable during armed conflict, because they cannot look after themselves. But adolescents too are vulnerable, and not only to the immediate physical risks of being in a conflict zone. Teenagers are already undergoing profound emotional changes, and are at the stage in their lives when they are learning about the values of their society and roles they may play in it.

The impact of conflict interrupts their development of a sense of identity, and those who have had distressing experiences cannot foresee a future for themselves. They lose their trust in adults, and may be left without adult guidance at a crucial stage in their development. As educational opportunities dwindle, teenage boys and girls may be bored and frightened. Military life may become an appealing option, particularly the opportunity to take up arms to reverse what feels like a situation of powerlessness[4]. Moreover, because teenagers are being used by armed factions, often this puts all adolescents under the suspicion of security forces. If they are harassed by security forces as a consequence, this can have the effect of making them antagonistic towards the authority and thus motivating them to join armed factions.

A Plan study of war-displaced children aged 8 to 13 in Sierra Leone found that 80 per cent had suffered the death of a parent, sibling or close relative; that 74 per cent had seen somebody being killed or injured with machetes; that 68 per cent had seen somebody being burned to death or tortured; and that nearly 10 per cent of the girls had been gang-raped on several occasions. The violence had caused severe psychological trauma. Over 70 per cent saw pictures of their worst experience in their minds; 94 per cent thought about

their worst experience even when they did not want to; 72 per cent were plagued by nightmares and bad dreams. Three-quarters of them worry they may not live to be an adult[5].

Plan Sierra Leone's annual program communication reports that post-traumatic disorders are evident in aspects of daily life activities in many parts of the country. Where there is a blatant disregard of societal and cultural values, this acts as a pointer to the high levels of trauma experienced by school children, youth and adults alike in the districts as a direct result of the rebel war.

It reports that even though physical and health education is one of the subjects in the school curriculum, schools do not have the necessary materials and equipment for children to demonstrate the practical aspects of the subject.

Plan's response

Plan's psychosocial trauma and peace education project in Sierra Leone consists of various activities ranging from workshops, counselling sessions to formation of peace clubs and expression activities including drama, games and sports.

More than a thousand boys from two displaced people's camps attending 30 secondary schools in the Western Area and Freetown benefited from the support offered by this project.

This project has provided assistance in strengthening the process of stabilisation, reintegration, and restoration of communities through the provision of refresher training on trauma counselling, peace building and reconciliation skills, which were addressed through workshops that targeted teenage school children, head teachers, guidance counsellors, religious leaders, traditional leaders, school management committees and youth groups in the Moyamba, Bombali and Port Loko districts of Sierra Leone.

Large numbers of children were displaced by the war in Sierra Leone, and lost out on several years of school. Returning to school establishes normality in a teenager's life that is vital to their protection and rehabilitation. It is particularly difficult for teenagers who, because they have missed years, have to re-start with much younger children. Schools are sometimes occupied by soldiers during war time, or destroyed during conflict, and can even be deliberate targets. But classes can be improvised in a safe place.

Plan's response

Secondary schooling in conflict and post-conflict situations is often not available to teenagers living in or near a war zone. The end of the 11 years of civil war in Sierra Leone resulted in increased poverty for an already weak and fragile economy. The attack on the Western Area (where the capital city Freetown is located) in January 1999 left many parents unable to provide the basic needs for their family, including the education and health care for their children. Children could not therefore continue to attend school, as parents were unable to afford the fees and other expenses.

Plan offers scholarships for secondary school-aged boys and girls in Sierra Leone. Many of these teenagers missed out on schooling during the conflict and would not otherwise have been able to go back to school after the war because their parents could not afford to send them. Parents have been relieved of the burden of payment of school fees as they have to provide other support such as uniforms, textbooks and writing materials in addition to the basic items of food, transportation to school, housing and health care.

Since 1999 Plan has supported a "RapidEd" project in camps for internally displaced people in Sierra Leone, which combine therapeutic emotional healing activities and self-expression with basic literacy and numeracy education. The methodology, developed by Plan in cooperation with UNESCO, is based on experiences in other war zones.

Plan recognises that it helps teenagers to express their thoughts and memories in their own time. It can often be easier for them to do this when they feel they are in a safe place:


Fidèl, Guinea

"As a normal reaction, the children don't want to speak about their experiences. They keep them inside, and will not overcome the trauma. Through different kinds of outward expression, connected to the safety of a school, they are much more likely to open up. We encourage them to sing, tell stories, discuss with others, play, make dramas, or draw pictures," said Terence McCaughan, Regional Program Adviser of Plan West Africa."[6]

During conflict, birth registration systems collapse and existing documentation is lost or destroyed[7].
As a result, children and adults become officially 'lost' – unaccounted for by any government system[8]. Children born in refugee camps across national borders are particularly vulnerable, as receiving states often refuse to register their births. They are effectively stateless, which not only deprives them of social opportunities, but also exposes them to many forms of discrimination[9]. Without identity papers, for example, children and their families may experience problems qualifying for food aid and refugee status, gaining access to health, educational and welfare services and claiming their right of residence when returning to their home country. Minors who cannot prove their age are also at more risk of being recruited into armed forces or groups[10].

Of the world's estimated 27 million refugees and 30 million displaced people, 80 per cent are women and children. Not only do children face physical danger from attacks and landmines on the way from their homes to refugee and displaced peoples camps, but they are not havens of safety themselves – particularly for girls. There are high levels of violence, recruitment for armed groups, substance abuse, and sexual violence against girls. A particular problem for women and girls, particularly teenage heads of household, is the distribution of basic resources such as food and plastic sheeting for shelter. It is usually men who control distribution, and they abuse their power by demanding bribes and sexual favours[11].

Child-headed households may consist of "family units" of brothers and sisters who have been orphaned, abandoned, or separated accidentally from their parents, children of extended family members, or even unrelated children. A minor, usually an adolescent girl, heads such households. Such adolescents are particularly vulnerable to exploitative labour and prostitution.

During armed conflict and in refugee camps, teenage girls are at risk of rape, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, trafficking, sexual humiliation, and mutilation. Rape and sexual humiliation are used as a weapon of war, to terrorise civilian populations and to force civilians from their land. Systematic rape is practiced in order to carry out ethnic cleansing through impregnating girls and women; this occurred in Bosnia and Croatia during the 1990s. Investigations into the 1994 genocide in Rwanda found that almost every female over the age of 12 who survived the killing was raped. Girls who are raped may become infected with HIV. And they may be ostracised by their families and communities, especially if they give birth as a result of rape. Many girls in this situation become extremely depressed, and some commit suicide[12].

Landmines

Even if they survive the conflict itself, children and teenagers remain at horrendous risk from the weapons, which also survive conflict: landmines and other unexploded ordnance (UXO). These remain a danger for decades after conflict. It is estimated that there are between 15,000 and 20,000 landmine casualties each year, a significant proportion of whom are below the age of 18.

Children and teenagers are particularly at risk because they are inquisitive. Mines and UXO can look like toys[13]. Children may pick up or step on the devices while herding animals, working in the fields or searching for firewood. Even when warnings have been posted about the danger of mines, children may not be able to recognise or read these signs. Or if communities are accustomed to living with mines, they may become dulled to the danger. Golom, 16, was killed by a cluster bomblet in 2000 in a camp for internally displaced people in Eritrea. His mother Amotetzion said: "He was just playing – I didn't know

what he was doing or that it was dangerous." Her son was trying to crack open a BL755 bomblet with a stone. Some of the children had taken to using one of the components of the bomblets, a bright copper cone, to make bells for their animals' necks. The explosion caused a severe head injury, which is what Golom's friends believe killed him, and his right arm was cut off at the shoulder[14].

Landmines are indiscriminate weapons; they cannot tell the difference between the step of a soldier or of a child. They cause injuries such as blindness, burns, and amputations. Some victims die of blood loss because they do not reach medical facilities in time. The injuries require long hospitalisation, and then a lengthy process of rehabilitation. In many countries, the facilities are simply not available, or if they are, families may not be able to afford them. Girls are even less likely than boys to receive medical treatment and prostheses.

More than 80 countries are affected to some degree by landmines or UXO; some of the worst affected are Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Cambodia, Chechnya, Colombia, Iraq, Nepal, and Sri Lanka[15]. It takes as little as $3 to lay a mine; but up to $1,000 to clear it, and the countries most affected by mines are those least able to afford the demining process[16]. Although there are now 143 States Parties to the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, landmines continue to be laid, for example in Myanmar (Burma) and Russia. The border between India and Pakistan was heavily mined in 2001[17] and recent reports suggest that government forces in Sudan and Burundi have been involved in laying antipersonnel mines[18] – though both governments strongly deny this.

In order to protect children from mines, the ban needs to be universal (India, Pakistan, China, Russia and the US are among the states that have not signed up), huge investment is needed in mine clearance, victims need to be supported, and children and teenagers need to be educated about the risks and how they can minimise them. Teenagers need to be protected from existing mines. The best way of doing this is to involve them in the learning process and consult them about how protection can best be afforded. In Afghanistan, Save the Children uses child-to-child approaches, role-playing, and survivors as educators to spread the message about the dangers of mines[19].

In April 2004 the UN Security Council passed its latest resolution dealing with children and armed conflict. It recognises the wide range of violations children suffer during conflict in addition to being recruited into armed forces: rape and other sexual violence, abduction and forced displacement, denial of humanitarian access, and attacks against schools and hospitals. It also recognises the importance of education in conflict areas, particularly in preventing recruitment into armed forces. It calls for action plans to monitor violations against children in conflict, and for action plans to halt the use of child soldiers[20].

Meanwhile, there are children who have been affected by conflict who need immediate help. Children have three main needs in emergencies: shelter and food; education; and emotional and psychological support. Adolescents have special needs, such as vocational and skills training, and support for those who are heads of households. Crucially, they should be involved in creating solutions, rather than just being seen as victims. One way to do this is to involve teenagers in developing and running programs for younger children in their communities[21].

In Freetown in Sierra Leone, the Children's Forum Network, a group of young people, lobbies the government on behalf of children. Chernor, aged 18, was requested by the UN to speak to newly arrived peacekeepers about the needs of children in a post-conflict situation. He now regularly speaks to new troops about the difficulties that children face.

Abdul, 14, said: "I want to appeal to the President to take care of the amputees and to clean the country and to take care of the boys in the street and to take care of the boys in the market, to put them to school."[22]

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 22

1. States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures shall, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or by any other person, receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention and in other international human rights or humanitarian instruments to which the said States are Parties.

Article 38

1. States Parties undertake to respect and to ensure respect for rules of international humanitarian law applicable to them in armed conflicts, which are relevant to the child.

4. In accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict.

In addition, the UNCRC introduced an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts (see Section 7 Girl and boy soldiers).

7. Girl and boy soldiers

Half a million children have been recruited into armed forces worldwide and at any time an estimated 300,000 children under the age of 18 will be actively fighting on nearly every continent[1] – although the real figure may be much higher. While some children have reported being recruited when they were as young as 7 the majority of child soldiers are aged between 15 and 18[2]. In some countries government forces as well as non-state forces such as armed groups and paramilitaries use child soldiers. And they are not just boys: up to a third of child soldiers are girls[3]. Girls are at particular risk of rape and sexual abuse in addition to the physical and psychological violence suffered by all child soldiers.

Around the globe, children are still being recruited. In Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire and parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) there was a huge increase in the recruitment of child soldiers during 2003. According to the UN, 10 of the parties involved in the DRC conflict used child soldiers[4]. In 2003, Refugees International reported that 75 per cent of the Union des Patriotes Congolais (UPC)'s 15,000 soldiers in the Ituri District were under 16[5]. According to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers up to 70,000 children fight in the government's armed forces in Myanmar (also known as Burma). They also report that in Uganda, children continue to be abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army to be used in its fight against the government. In Sri Lanka the armed opposition 'Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam' are reported to be continuing to abduct children. And in Colombia an estimated 11,000 children, some of them as young as 12, are now being used as soldiers by armed groups[6].

Children who are forced to participate in armed conflict suffer a high risk of serious injury and death. Their inexperience and lack of training makes them prone to much higher casualty rates than adult soldiers. Those who do survive may end up permanently disabled, or suffering psychological damage – including post-traumatic stress disorder – because of their exposure to the violence[7]. Unsurprisingly, many suffer severe psychological damage. It can take years for such children to be properly rehabilitated into society, while for many others; the opportunity for recovery arrives too late and sometimes not at all.

The widespread availability of cheap and lightweight small arms, which do not need an adult to carry or operate them, allows children to be turned into killers. Child soldiers are often used for particularly horrific tasks including atrocities against their own families and communities, in order to destroy family and social ties. But child soldiers are not only those who carry arms: they also work as messengers, spies, porters, cooks and are used to lay and clear landmines. Girls are made to become sexual slaves, 'girlfriends', or 'wives' to commanders[8].

Children are used because they are easier to manipulate and condition into being obedient killers. Some are given drugs and alcohol before being told to fight or commit atrocities. Training regimes are harsh, punishments brutal, and abuses frequent. Conditions in some armed groups' training camps in the DRC are so brutal that children die before completing their training. Those accused of desertion suffer severe penalties, further violence, or death[9].

Why do teenagers become soldiers?

Some have no choice and are abducted and recruited by force. Others enlist because their own support networks of family and community have been destroyed by war, leaving them little other means of survival. Many join voluntarily to escape poverty, abuse and violence at home. Or they join armed groups because they have suffered atrocities by government armed forces. Others enlist to avenge the deaths of family members. The longer a conflict continues, however, the more likely they are to be recruited, as armed forces become desperate for more recruits.

Teenage soldiers miss out on their education, which adds to the difficulties they face in reintegrating back into civilian life. They are less likely to find jobs, and so are more likely to drift into crime or being recruited for armed groups again.

Teenage soldiers suffer so much violence that the specific problem of sexual violence against girl soldiers was for a long time overlooked. The breakdown of all moral codes and the obedience, which is demanded of teenage soldiers, usually under threat of violence, makes sexual exploitation possible. Between 1990 and 2001 sexual exploitation of child soldiers was reported in 17 countries[10], although the taboos against speaking out about it and the limited amount of research that has been done mean that the number may be greater.

In Colombia, girls are reportedly forced into being 'girlfriends' of the commanders, and are forced to take contraceptives or to have abortions if they become pregnant[11]. Forty per cent of those girls who volunteered for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), an armed opposition group, did so to escape abuse in the home and to seek equality by fighting alongside men. But they found only more abuse.

Plan's response

More than two million children in Colombia have been affected by war in some form or other. To counter the acceptance of violence, and to limit further exposure to the trauma it can bring, Plan has embarked upon an ambitious Conflict Resolution for Adolescents Program located in conflict sensitive areas. The program trains adolescents in building peace in their own communities. Although a challenge - violence in war-torn Colombia is seen by many as a way of life - the youth of Colombia are determined to bring peace to their communities.

The project centres on prevention: young people are given the skills to help them avoid becoming involved in violence and, at the same time, actively promote peaceful conflict resolution. Thirty-one schools and five youth organisations are participating, and each has a multiplier team of five youth, two teachers, and two parents. At the end of the three-year project, there will be 36 youth groups and a new 3,000-strong army of peace builders. Thirteen year-old Jennifer told Plan: "I want to work not only with people in my school but also with people in my community."

Although still in its infancy, the project is having an impact. UNESCO chose it as an example of best practice in education, which was celebrated at the 47th International Conference on Education in Geneva in September 2004[12].

An essential part of the process of reintegrating teenage soldiers back into civilian society is the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process. DDR efforts have helped some former child soldiers return to life with their families and communities. They need education, vocational training and psychosocial support. If children have joined armed groups because they no longer have a family, the challenge to integrate them into society is even greater, because life as a soldier or sexual slave may seem to be the only option which offers the possibility of shelter. Some children are detained and then forgotten about at the end of conflicts, or are re-recruited by armed groups.

Girls in particular tend to be neglected by DDR programs which fail to recognise that even if they have played less visible roles in the conflict by not actually taking part in fighting, they have still been abused and traumatized and are in need of help. For example, in the conflict in Sierra Leone about 30 per cent of child soldiers in rebel forces were girls. Yet between 1998 and 2002 only 8 per cent of the 6,900 children who were formally demobilised were girls. Many of the girl soldiers were left to look after themselves and ended

up in camps for internally displaced people[13]. Girls who have been raped or sexually abused or who have borne the children of commanders can face stigma and discrimination when they try to fit back into their communities.


Panos/Martin Adler

Kabah's story

Kabah, now 18, was a child soldier in Sierra Leone who witnessed and committed numerous atrocities. Taken by the rebels when he was just 6 or 7 years old he was taught how to kill. Prior to each mission he was injected with addictive drugs. "It's like, you will crave for it as time goes on – you really crave for it." Drug addiction was used to make child soldiers comply with the adults' commands – no matter how brutal those commands were. "You listen to their command and sometime you will be very bloody that whatever they say to you, you will try to execute."

Following one ambush he managed to escape but on return to his mother's house he was met with mistrust. Out of desperation he was forced to join another army to survive. After six months of training he had learnt further skills and became a member of the reinforcement troops. By this time he was just 8 or 9 years old.

He recalls one incident of violence very clearly. He was walking back to camp when one child he was with started to complain that he was very tired. "We tell him 'let him don't say anything', and at the end of the day he started crying and the commander asked him twice that 'are you really tired?' and he told the commander that 'yes'. Kabah offered to carry the child but the commander refused to let him. 'If someone is tired, then he should go and rest.' As the boy walked on the commander passed his rifle to soldier behind the boy. As the child was crying, he was shot in the back of the head. He was six or seven years old. He was killed for being tired."

Kabah received rehabilitation from UNICEF counsellors and now works as a program coordinator in Sierra Leone. He lobbies on behalf of children and tours classrooms, teaching children about their rights and advocates for them at national events[14].

Albert's story

Albert was 15 when he was recruited by an armed opposition group in the DRC. "[T]hey would give us 'chanvre' [cannabis] and force us to kill people to toughen us up. Sometimes they brought us women and girls to rape... They would beat us if we refused."[15]

Fabienne's story

Fabienne was 13 when she was abducted in Burundi by combatants she believes were members of an armed opposition group. "I don't know how many people had sex with me. A man would come, then another and another," she said. "You couldn't refuse ... they said they'd kill you if you ran away."[16]

In Sierra Leone, a girl soldier in the RUF rebel movement told researchers that "our only motive to exist was killing. That is the only thing that we thought about... I burnt houses, captured people, I carried looted property. I was responsible for tying people, and killing. I was not too good at shooting, but I was an expert in burning houses. This was less risky. We could just enter the house after the enemy left the area and set it on fire with kerosene or petrol."[17]

Preventing the use of child soldiers[18]

In 1989 the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) had set 15 as the minimum age for military recruitment. In 2000 there was a very positive development: a new Optional Protocol on children in armed conflict, known as the Child Soldiers Protocol which was added to the CRC. It prohibits the use of children under the age of 18 in conflict, bans compulsory recruitment of under-18s, bans voluntary recruitment of under-18s by armed groups, and requires strict safeguards for voluntary recruitment. By mid-August 2004, it had been ratified by 77 states.

The Optional Protocol is a good start, but it will take concerted action by governments and the international community for it to be universally ratified and implemented. However, with some governments steadfastly ignoring it, and with armed groups continuing to flout the international obligations that they have signed up to[19], the world is still a long way from ensuring that children do not have to be soldiers. The Coalition to End the Use of Child Soldiers was disturbed to note in its latest report that so far "remarkably little progress has been made" towards ending the use of child soldiers[20].

Although there is a developing global consensus against the use of child soldiers, actually bringing an end to it is a huge challenge. The new International Criminal Court will treat the use of child soldiers as a war crime; this was reaffirmed in a decision by the Special Court for Sierra Leone in May 2004. The International Labour Organisation prohibits compulsory recruitment of children under 18 for use in armed conflict.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 38

1. States Parties undertake to respect and to ensure respect for rules of international humanitarian law applicable to them in armed conflicts which are relevant to the child.

2. States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities.

3. States Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest.

Article 39

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.

8. Social expectations

Whilst pre-teen children are affected by social expectations in relation to their conduct and appearance, in many societies they enjoy relative freedoms compared with their adolescent brothers and sisters. As children reach their teens, it is common for them to desire more independence from parents. But this is often quite opposite to what parents have in mind for them, particularly for daughters.

Every culture in the world puts pressure on adolescents to conform to a set of standards that can be difficult for them to meet. These range from traditional moral codes that are strictly enforced by parents, religious leaders or society at large – to peer pressure or more subtle forms of pressure brought to bear by subliminal expectations to be slim, to follow fashion or not to be attracted to members of the same sex. Social expectations can put a lot of pressure on girls. In many societies girls experience many new restrictions when they reach puberty, whilst boys reaching puberty are perceived as grown-up and allowed many of the freedoms of adulthood. However, boys who fail to live up to the masculine roles defined by their society can experience rejection, bullying and other social pressures.

Moral attitudes

Attitudes and taboos about sexual morality usually have a much greater impact on girls than on boys. The desire to preserve virginity amongst marriageable girls – as well as fears for their safety - can motivate communities to impose severe restrictions on freedom of movement and freedom of expression for girls, as well as limiting their access to education. In order to ensure that daughters do not lose their virginity before they are married, families resort to measures that include: arranging for them to marry very young – sometimes even before they reach their teens; subjecting them to female genital cutting; or not allowing them to go out in public without an adult escort so that they cannot go to school.

Female Genital Cutting (FGC) is the general term used to describe the practice of removing or altering the female genitalia, also known as female genital mutilation, female circumcision, and excision. There are four main types of FGC[1] that are practiced in many cultures and belief systems. It is sometimes wrongly perceived that FGC has religious roots. However, the practice stems mainly from cultural traditions and reasons for the practice include "confirming femininity" in some cultures, controlling the sexual behaviour of a woman, and preserving aesthetics and cleanliness in cultures that view parts of the female genitalia as dirty or dangerous."[2] Obstacles to eradicating FGC include the fact that women, many of whom have undergone the procedure themselves, consider FGC a valuable cultural tradition. In some cases, it is considered a prerequisite for marriage. Whilst male circumcision is often performed in association with a public celebration, FGC is more likely to be a private affair that is seldom openly discussed.

FGC occurs in many parts of the world[3] though most often in Africa. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), "it is estimated that over 130 million girls and women have undergone some form of genital cutting and at least 2 million girls are at risk of undergoing the practice every year."[4] Most cases of FGC are practiced on very young girls with the health risks often not coming to the fore until they become wives and mothers – often in their teens. In some areas FGC is practiced during infancy (as early as a couple of days after birth) while in other societies it may be performed during childhood, before marriage, during the first pregnancy or sometimes even after the birth of a first child. Most typically though girls undergo FGC

when they are aged between seven and ten[5]. In some countries, FGC is performed without the use of anaesthetics or pain relief. The health risks associated with the most mutilating type of FGC – infibulation (or Type 3 FGC), which involves the excision of part or all of the external genitalia and the stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening – are truly alarming

In Somalia, infibulation has contributed to the high maternal mortality rate of 16 for every 1,000 women. Haemorrhage, prolonged and obstructed labour, infections and eclampsia are the major causes of death at childbirth. Genital mutilation (infibulation) has a direct impact on, and aggravates these conditions.[6] Meanwhile in Sudan, where infibulation is also practised, doctors estimate that between 10 and 30 per cent of girls die from FGC-related complications[7].

Plan's response

Clearly FGC is a serious violation of the rights of the child and it is for this reason Plan has been working in Mali to reduce the rate of FGC. Plan launched a four-year program to increase the knowledge and awareness of the dangers of FGC and sought to provide care for those who had experienced FGC first hand. Plan developed a three-pronged approach to combat the practice of FGC. First it sought to bring the issue out into the open, and lobbied in the decision-making arenas to create national support for a discussion on the issue. Secondly, Plan sought to empower community-based organisations working against the practice and third, Plan attempted to strengthen civil society action by supporting people to debate FGC in public. On a national level the program was highly successful, even the President of Mali helped to bring the risks of FGC to the attention of the public. Other prominent personalities such as religious leaders, politicians, and journalists support the campaign. As a result, discussions about FGC became more public and Plan was able to emphasise and highlight the health risks associated with FGC to a wide audience. Although most girls in Mali are still excised the overall results of the program have been encouraging. The campaign has already gained significant momentum and the government is now taking clearer steps towards the abolition of the practice.

Honour killing is the practice of killing girls and women who are alleged to have defiled a family's honour by engaging in sexual activity either before or outside of marriage. Evidence exists, however, to suggest that honour killings also occur when the girl is blameless. Indeed, reports have shown that girls have been killed 'for honour' if they have been raped, abused or have become the unwitting victim of sexual rumours. In most cases, male members of the family are responsible for the killing and because penalties for such crimes are lenient or non-existent in many countries, many of these murders go unpunished. Legislation often supports such crimes. In Iran and Pakistan for example, men are permitted by law to kill wives who have committed adultery while in Egypt, the law allows a husband to receive a reduced sentence if he can prove he killed his wife in defence of his honour[8].

The precise numbers of girls and women 'killed for honour' is unknown though the UNFPA has estimated that up to 5,000 honour killings occur every year[9]. In 1997, an estimated 300 women were killed in one province of Pakistan alone[10].

In addition to honour killings, some women are killed simply because they or their families are poor. In India it has been estimated that more than 5,000 women are killed every year because their in-laws believe that their dowries are inadequate. As with honour killings, only a very small percentage of their murderers are ever brought to justice[11].

Social pressure

Pressure to be slim, beautiful and fashionable, or just to meet the social or academic expectations of parents, peers and teachers can be too much for teenagers to take. It is not just teenagers growing up in traditional or religious communities who face social pressures.

Some pressures, for example, are exerted on to the teenager by parents and teachers who demand that they excel in exams. They do this believing that they are acting in the child's best interest. The pressure of exams can be so intense that often it only serves to bring to a head, deep-seated feelings of worthlessness, and an intense fear of failure. Fierce competition can be drummed into a teenager by 'concerned' parents and

teachers who are worried about their future employment prospects and income earning potential. Such pressure to succeed, however, can be truly overwhelming, especially at such a vulnerable and emotional age. Unchecked, it can lead to severe depression and even suicide. The British government's watchdog, MHRA, for example, showed that in 1995, 46,000 anti-depressant prescriptions were given to teenagers in full-time education between the ages of 16 and 18. By 2003, the number of anti-depressants prescribed had risen to 140,000[12]. The number of 'feel good' drugs prescribed to children under 16 such as Prozac and Seroxat also rose over the same period from 76,000 to 110,000[13]. Clearly, a lot of students cannot cope with such intense pressure and many feel that they have few options left open to them. In the US in 1997, "more adolescents died from suicide than AIDS, cancer, heart disease, birth defects and lung disease."[14] Indeed, suicide rates for adolescent females in the US increased threefold between 1960 and 1980 alone[15].

Victor Brott

Appearance

One of the most obvious pressures placed on teenage girls in the developed world is to conform to certain expectations about how they should look. This 'look' is often dictated to them by peer groups and the media. Peer groups can be notoriously cruel and may ridicule or exclude those from their immediate circle that don't conform to a certain image. For the teenager that doesn't quite 'fit in', this can be a time of intense depression and anxiety.

It is media, however, which has the most powerful impact on vulnerable adolescents when it comes to appearance. Television is a powerful influencer. In the US one study revealed that 70 per cent of girls said that they had wanted to look like a character on television and about 30 per cent had actually changed their appearance or gone on a diet in order to do so[16]. By comparing themselves to the images of 'beautiful' women on television, many adolescent girls are left with low self-esteem.

A study on the content of beauty and fashion magazines "supports the perception that female happiness and success are tied to physical appearance, with ultra-thinness being the preferred state of health and beauty."[17] Such imagery has led to thinness being equated with success by many adolescent girls, and has increased the pressure on them to lose weight when often they are not overweight in the first place. This has led to a marked increase in the number of eating disorders amongst adolescent females in the majority of developed countries. Social pressure to stay unhealthily thin is a primary cause of anorexia nervosa, which in the US affects one per cent of the female adolescent population. In a ten-year study conducted by the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 33 per cent of participants reported that anorexia or bulimia started between the ages of 11 and 15, and 43 per cent reported an onset between the ages of 16 and 20.

In the UK, a survey conducted of 37,500 young women between the ages of 12 and 15 by Exeter University in 1998 revealed that over half (57.5 per cent) listed appearance as the biggest concern in their lives. The same study indicated that 59 per cent of the 12 and 13 year-old girls who suffered from low self-esteem were also dieting[18]. In Canada too, more than one in four teenaged girls has symptoms of an eating disorder[19], while in Japan, "one in every 20 girls enrolled at high schools in the Tokyo metropolitan area suffers from anorexia nervosa."[20]

Domestic duty

Grooming for domestic roles, deprives millions of girls of their right to an education. A combination of defined roles for women, poverty and lack of secondary schools often means that girls never go to school or never get the chance to get beyond elementary school. Education is an extremely noticeable area where girls suffer disproportionately to boys. In many countries parents are unwilling to spend as much on girls' education as on boys'.

Examples of how girls are discriminated against in the field of education are countless. In Sudan for example, the ratio of female-to-male adult literacy is just 28 per cent. The comparable ratios are 32 per cent in Burkina Faso and 35 per cent in Sierra Leone[21]. In Niger, only 15 per cent of girls are literate[22] while in Chad, for every 100 boys receiving a secondary education there are only 31 girls[23].

Girls' health and safety also suffers as a result of prejudice and discrimination. In many countries parents often give a lower priority to girls' health care than to boys'. In the Punjab, spending on medical care for boys in the first two critical years of life was double that spent on girls.

Yet research has shown that better educated and healthier mothers are much more likely to have full-term pregnancies, stronger and better-cared-for and-educated children, and are much less likely to end up or remain in poverty.

A survey of six rural communities in India found 730 girls and 513 boys ill with HIV/AIDs related illnesses. Fifty per cent of the boys gained access to a doctor compared to just 25 per cent of the girls. In addition, sexual abuse is more prevalent for young girls than boys. Research has found that up to 58 per cent of girls who get assaulted are age 15 and under[24].

Sexuality is another major challenge that many people have to come to terms with in their teenage years. In many societies teenagers still receive little or no education about the changes their bodies go through at puberty, or about sex, relationships and reproduction.

Gays and lesbians exist in every society, but few communities understand people who prefer same-sex relationships. Gay and lesbian teenagers everywhere are confronted with rejection and marginalisation at best – and at worst can be victimised, bullied, beaten and even have their lives threatened or are driven to attempt suicide. (See Section 5 Bullying and punishment)

Plan's response

Plan believes that a fundamental cause of children and adolescents suffering and failing to realise their potential is that their rights are not always respected or considered. Development is thus not only about meeting specific needs, but is also about young people being empowered to claim their rights.

Plan therefore works with adolescents and their communities to support better awareness of the rights of teenagers and recognition of gender equality. Plan believes that empowering girls and boys to feel more confident about making their opinions heard gives them the choice to challenge social attitudes and take more control over decisions affecting them.

The organisation thus promotes the participation of all members of the community in the process of development and encourages communities to develop strategies to ensure the equal participation of girls and women as well as marginalised members of society.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child protects against all forms of mental and physical violence and maltreatment (Article 19.1); to freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (Article 37a), and requires States to take all effective and appropriate measures to abolish traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children (Article 24.3).

Article 2, States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

9. Marriage and motherhood

Marriage and relationships present a challenge to teenagers and their families all over the world. In almost every country of the world parents and society at large set boundaries, of one kind or another, over teenagers' freedom to make choices about relationships and marriage. The causes may be social, economic or to do with cultural attitudes in relation to men's authority over women and children. In some societies parents choose when and whom their daughters should marry, and the penalties for transgression can be harsh. In others, young people have much more freedom – but can risk rejection from their families if they defy expectations by choosing 'unacceptable' partners or life-styles. (See Section 8 Social expectations)

Early marriage means that millions of girls (as well as boys) have to take on very grown-up roles – sex, pregnancy and motherhood, when they are still only children. Many poor parents decide to arrange for their daughters to be married very young, often for economic reasons. And it is common for girls to have no say in decisions about who and when they should marry.

"Surely I'm too young to be thinking of a husband and definitely too young to be married. But I have to tie the knot with a stranger in just a few days. The fact that I am just 13 is of little consequence as child marriage is very much part of our tradition. It seems like just the other day when I was moving around without a care in the world. But suddenly one day I was informed that my marriage had been fixed. My body is unprepared for the tasks it will be asked to perform. In fact, the very idea fills me with fear, and I tried to convey my feelings to my mother. But all arguments with my mother failed. Though I knew she understood my fear, she too was helpless."

Vaishali, from Maharashtra, India, on the eve of her marriage[1].

Early marriage, which is overwhelmingly a problem for girls, takes away childhood and the opportunity for personal development, and can lead to a repressed and insecure existence. Girls are expected to fit into a new household, become wife to an older boy or man, daughter-in-law, housekeeper and mother: a huge burden for a child who is still developing.

Many families living in poverty sometimes see girls as an economic burden and want to marry them off as early as possible to ensure the survival of the rest of the family. But communities with a high number of very young parents are particularly vulnerable to economic and social insecurity.

Some parents believe that marrying their daughters early protects their virginity until marriage and keeps them safe from sexual assault. Early marriage is most common in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, although it also occurs in communities in North Africa, the Middle East and other parts of Asia[2].

UNICEF warns that it is hard to know how many early marriages occur because so many are not registered. However, a survey in Bangladesh in 1996-97 found that 5 per cent of 10 to 14 year olds were married. Anecdotal evidence and small studies indicate that it is widespread: for example, a 1998 survey in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh found that nearly 14 per cent of girls were married between the ages of 10 and 14. In Ethiopia and in parts of West Africa, marriage at the age of seven or eight is not uncommon[3].

Plan's response

After much research, Plan Niger began to educate community members about the dangers of early marriage. Plan staff held discussions with religious leaders about reproductive health issues. From then on, they trained village leaders in these issues utilising the assistance of the well-respected religious leaders. Plan also reinforces girls' education and school youth programs to keep young people engaged in healthy, stable environments where messages can be impressed and self-esteem built. These programs encourage dialogue amongst youth to better understand the issues affecting them and help them become agents for change. On the national level, Plan is working with the Ministry of Social Affairs to implement the Code for the Child, which will discourage the practice of early marriage as a violation of children's rights[4].

A study conducted by Plan in a rural area of Niger in 2003, found that 68 per cent of girls were married before their first menstruation, 52 per cent had a child before they reached the age of 16 years, and half experienced complications during their first pregnancy[5].

Of those who had been married before the age of 16, only 16 per cent had received some education. Those who had married later had a much higher rate of schooling, with 42 per cent of them having received some education.

Panos/Martin Adler

It discovered that despite the adverse consequences for girls' education and health, communities in Niger do not regard early marriage as a problem. Different groups had different reasons for supporting it. Most reasons were economic and social rather than traditional or religious. Men were worried about ensuring family continuity, and both men and women saw it as a way of preserving a daughters' virginity until marriage. Girls regarded it as a way to improve their economic status and gain social recognition, and to get away from their families and family domestic duties. Women saw it as a means to ensure their daughters are socially accepted.

In Nepal, where 40 per cent of girls are married before the age of 14, different communities' traditional beliefs emphasise the importance of early marriage. The Majhi and Danuwar communities, for example, insist on the early marriage of their daughters because the death rituals demand the presence of married daughters who need to present the holy spirit with gifts for the peace of the departed souls. Among the orthodox Brahmin/Chetri in the Karnali zone of the far west, girls need to get married before they attain puberty in order to be socially accepted. Parents may also see it as a way to protect their daughters from rape, prostitution and trafficking[6]. Economic factors are also significant. Child marriage can be a way of securing free labour for the family. The dowry system in Nepal (and other parts of South Asia) is a strong contributory factor. The amount of money demanded by the groom's family increases with the education and qualifications of the boy, so it increases the older he becomes. Therefore the parents of girls try to marry them off as quickly as possible, since a younger girl can get a groom who is younger and demands less money.

Plan's response

Plan works with adolescents to inform and educate them about sexual health, reproduction, and family planning. It tries to ensure that young people understand their bodies, and that girls are empowered by knowing their reproductive rights. In 2004 Plan Philippines won an award for its Teen's Guide for a Healthy Lifestyle - Healthy Young Ones, Yo!

Plan's Basic Life Options project for girls and boys in Nepal addresses early marriage by enhancing the life skills of teenagers. The project aims to:

- enhance girls' assertiveness and develop positive thinking about their future lives
- equip them with the necessary life skills to protect themselves from harmful practices and risk situations and
- promote equality between girls and boys

The project informs young people about their legal rights, family planning and sexual health, work and financial planning, as well as promoting awareness of risks such as early marriage, sexual exploitation and domestic violence. As a result, the teenagers understand the benefits of staying on at school and know how to raise their voices against injustice and organise their own self-help or pressure groups.

Plan Nepal, in common with many of Plan's country programs, campaigns to encourage parents to register the birth of their children in order that their ages are on record and that in the future they may be able to benefit from legal protection against early marriage.

Education is at the heart of the problem of young marriage. Educated women are less likely to allow their children to be married off. But education is precisely what is denied when girls are married too early, which perpetuates the cycle in poor communities. As well as stopping girls' education (if they were receiving any in the first place), early marriage isolates children from their peer networks, and leaves them more vulnerable to abuse within the marriage. Children who refuse to marry or choose a partner not approved by their parents may be punished or even killed by their families in so-called 'honour killings'. (See Section 8 Social expectations)

Plan's response

All over the world, Plan is working to increase girls' access to education. (See Section 14 Education). There is a strong correlation between the number of years schooling a girl receives and the age she reaches before becoming a bride and/or mother.

Another area of risk associated with early marriage is the impact on reproductive health. Girls whose bodies are too young for sex suffer physical consequences such as cervical cancer, and because their bodily tissues are more easily damaged, are more vulnerable to contracting sexually transmitted diseases including HIV.

It has been estimated that one in every ten births worldwide is to a mother who is still a child herself. But girls whose bodies have not yet developed are at serious risk of fatal complications from pregnancy and childbirth, particularly when medical attention is not available during a difficult birth. Globally, girls aged 15-19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as women in their twenties. And girls aged 10-14 are five times as likely to die[7]. Save the Children estimates that 70,000 adolescent mothers die every year in the developing world because young girls are having children before they are physically ready for parenthood[8].

The physical risks of adolescent childbearing include toxaemia, haemorrhage, anaemia, infection, and obstructed labour which, when the girl is poor and a caesarian is not available, can result in fistula for the mother and the death of the baby. Girls with fistula suffer incontinence, and face a bleak future. Surgical treatment costs $100-400 and so is usually out of reach; some girls are rejected by their families and have to turn to prostitution to survive[9].

Just as it helps to prevent young teenage marriage, education is also vital in the field of maternal health. Even mothers who have only a basic education have healthier pregnancies, safer deliveries and healthier babies because they are more likely to seek healthcare for their children and themselves. Mothers who have had some education are more likely to send their children to school, and to use contraception to increase space between births. Girls who begin childbearing early are more likely to fall into a pattern of having babies in quick succession, to the detriment of their own and their child's health[10].

Child rights activists in Bangladesh have identified birth registration as a guard against child marriage. Parents may conceal the real age of their daughter and offer her in marriage when income is low as a way of relieving their economic 'burden'. The absence of a birth certificate makes it difficult to verify the age of the girls concerned[11].

Thirteen year-old Lydia from Ethiopia says: "In the news we hear about the problems of girls being abducted when they are going home from school. After being abducted they are raped and forced to marry. On the radio we hear about girls who fight against this practice and take them to court. If these girls don't know how old they are, then they will have problems in court. If they can prove that they are underage, their case will be stronger."[12]

In Andhra Pradesh, India, the mean age for marriage for girls in rural areas is just 14.7 years[13] which explains why, in the country as a whole, studies reveal that between one in five and one in three girls in India give

birth by the time they are 17[14]. According to a UNESCO report, 73 per cent of girls in Bangladesh are married by age of 15 with 21 per cent having at least one child[15].

The incidence of HIV infection is considerably higher among young married adolescent girls than unmarried girls - 47.5 per cent higher among married adolescent girls in Kisumu, Kenya, and 65.5 per cent higher in Ndola, Zambia[16]. Often young married girls are violently initiated into sexual life and subjected to early pregnancies. Pregnancy is the leading cause of death for young women aged 15 to 19 worldwide[17] and half a million women die during pregnancy or childbirth every year[18].

Teenagers in developing countries need access to confidential, low-cost, culturally-appropriate and youth-friendly contraceptive services to delay too-early childbearing and protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. Married girls need contraception, and so do unmarried teenagers; premarital sex is common[19].

They also need comprehensive sex education, which includes information about contraception as well as being informed about the benefits of abstaining from sex until marriage. Children who have received comprehensive sex education are more likely to initiate sexual activity later and to use contraception when they do. They delay the onset of sexual activity, reduce frequency of sexual activity, reduce the number of partners, and increase contraceptive use[20].

But even if teenagers know about contraception, they often cannot get access to contraception services. Two percent of sexually active young women in Niger, Rwanda, and Senegal reported using contraception; 23 per cent in Cameroon; one per cent in the Philippines; 34 per cent in Indonesia; and less than 11 per cent throughout Latin America and the Caribbean[21]. There are also practical constraints: incorrect or inadequate information, difficulty in travelling to and obtaining services, prohibitive cost, and fears about confidentiality. There are also personal issues that prevent girls in particular from accessing and using contraception: fear of parents finding out, unequal power relations which make it difficult to negotiate condom use with male partners, fear of violence from their partner, and concerns about the side effects of contraception.

Peer education can be an effective way to get information about contraception to teenagers. An initiative by Advocates for Youth to use peer educators to provide reproductive health information to 12 to 24 year olds in West Africa found that participants increased their knowledge and changed their behaviour, and were much more willing to buy and use contraceptives[22].

Improved access to and use of contraception would reduce the number of dangerous abortions undergone by teenage girls. In Nigeria, for example, where abortion is illegal except to save a woman's life, it is thought that more than 600,000 women have abortions every year - and that a third of these may be adolescent girls. Hospital studies show that up to 80 per cent of Nigerian patients with abortion-related complications were adolescents[23].

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 3

1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

10. HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS has become one of the most serious challenges in the fight to improve the lives of children around the world. It is not only the children infected with HIV/AIDS that are affected. As a generation of parents and workers become ill and die, a generation of children is left behind to face the consequences. Already, AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa has orphaned an estimated 12.3 million children[1], and this number is set to rise to 25 million by 2010[2].

Plan's response

Plan works in a number of ways to support children and teenagers affected by HIV/AIDS. The organisation's intervention is based on its Circle of Hope framework which was first piloted in Uganda, and is currently Plan's main strategy in a pan-African Hope for African Children Initiative, which is a joint program with Plan and other non-governmental organisations in nine sub-Saharan African countries.

The framework's four strategic objectives are: building awareness and reducing stigma, ensuring the child's future, preparing the family for transition and extending duration of parent-child. The circle of Hope's strength lies in its comprehensive approach in dealing with issues that surround children affected by HIV/AIDS. It:

- Centres on needs and rights of a child: development, protection, survival and participation
- Offers an opportunity for contribution from different people including government, local non-governmental organisations, faith-based organisations, community and children themselves
- Promotes culturally sensitive methods and processes in the whole project cycle
- Respects people's values and beliefs
- Is driven by community demands and needs
- Aims to build capacity of communities to become 'AIDS competent' through comprehensive approaches that address social security, community coping mechanisms, root causes of vulnerability, gender equity and poverty reduction

For the children who are left behind when their parents die, it is not only grief they have to deal with. They are more likely to face malnutrition, family break-up, health problems, discrimination, the risk of ending up on the streets, and, having been born without HIV, become more vulnerable to contracting it. Orphans who have lost both parents are also much less likely than other children to be in school. All of these factors drastically limit whatever opportunities they had of escaping poverty.

Unlike many illnesses, HIV/AIDS generally kills both parents, since if one parent is infected with HIV, the likelihood is that the other spouse may also be infected[3]. For children this is catastrophic as it means that many will watch both parents die within a relatively short time. Some children have been orphaned by AIDS two or even three times over, as their aunts, uncles, and grandparents who took over their care, die and leave them to fend for themselves once again.

Plan's response

Plan also works on care, protection and support of children and families affected by HIV/AIDS. Families are encouraged to write memory books to help prepare the HIV-positive parent and children for the loss

of the parent. In these diaries parents write down stories from their childhood, memories from their own lives, the children's first years, etc. This provides children with a family history and important information about their past when the parents have passed away.

At a project supported by Plan Uganda, so far 250 families, parents and children have written memory books.

"The memory books mean a great deal to both the parents and the children. The books help them put words to feelings, thoughts, and experiences," explains Beatrice Muwa, Senior Health Coordinator for Plan in Tororo, Uganda. "This is a difficult process for many Africans because it is not common to talk about death before it occurs." Beatrice says the memory books help children through the healing process and become their most treasured possession.

The worst impact of the pandemic by far is in Africa, which has three-quarters of the world's estimated 34 to 46 million people living with HIV/AIDS[4]. Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly badly affected, being home to two-thirds of all people living with HIV and three out of four people dying from AIDS globally[5]. But another fifth of those living with HIV are now in Asia, and infection rates there and in Latin America are starting to take off.

Plan's response

Plan is part of the Hope for African Children Initiative (HACI), a collaboration of international humanitarian organisations which work together to increase the capacity of local communities to provide support services to orphans and vulnerable children in Africa. It helps support such children by preparing families for the loss of a parent, and helping children get education and health care after they have lost one or both parents.

In the vast majority of sub-Saharan countries, extended families have taken responsibility for more than 90 per cent of children orphaned by AIDS'[6]. But because of the scale of the epidemic and other pressures resulting from poverty, this traditional support system has come under severe pressure. In many cases, it has been completely overwhelmed as extended families become increasingly impoverished by the struggle to care for the new additions to their family. Children who have no relatives willing or able to take them in must survive in an adult world by using their own initiative to bring in food for themselves and their younger siblings; increasing numbers of orphans are being forced to head up their own households. In Swaziland, an estimated one in ten households are run by orphans[7]. When they can no longer cope, they end up on the streets[8].

Christopher's story

Christopher is a 15 year-old boy who lives a few miles from a village near Kampala, the capital of Uganda. After losing his mother to AIDS three years ago, Christopher became one of the estimated 1.7 million children orphaned by the epidemic in Uganda. His father had already succumbed to AIDS. Christopher's situation illustrates many of the problems, which AIDS has created for children already living in poverty.

Unlike many orphans who often end up in the care of a relative within their extended families, Christopher runs his own household. Emotionally scarred and frightened, children such as Christopher cope with grief while facing a very uncertain future. On top of this he has the additional burden of being responsible for younger siblings.

Christopher's brother, Kinthu, is 11 years old. Their three sisters are currently in the care of other relatives. "Siblings are often separated because no single family can take on the whole lot of orphans. We, however, try to encourage the family unit to stay together, but resources are scarce," says Dorothy, a program officer with the National Community of Women living with HIV/AIDS (NACWOLA), one of Plan's partners in implementing HIV/AIDS programs in Uganda.

Although Christopher himself appears to be healthy, his younger sister has been getting sick more and more frequently. None of the children has yet gone for voluntary HIV testing. They are too young to face a potentially devastating result. If HIV status is confirmed, the carers or foster family may be less inclined to look after a sick child.

Christopher is not able to go to school because he must tend the plot of land around his house, which represents the only chance of putting food on the table for himself and his brother.

Although teenagers might seem more able to look after themselves than young children, they are particularly vulnerable, as they are without adult guidance at a turbulent and emotionally vulnerable time in their lives. They are more likely to be double orphans - having witnessed the death of both parents. Because they are a bit older, it is more likely that they have to work and care for younger siblings. The kind of survival strategies that are available to them, such as eating less or selling household assets, only increases their vulnerability[9]. Girls especially may be forced into the desperate situation of having to sell sex in order to buy food and clothing for younger siblings, which leaves them open to exploitation, violence and abuse, and of course, vulnerable to contracting HIV themselves[10].

Plan's response

Plan assists orphans and vulnerable children with school fees for education or vocational training for youth. Through occupations such as carpentry, bricklaying, tailoring, or working as a clerk, young people can support themselves and their siblings. It works with single parents who are HIV-positive by ensuring they gain access to health services and providing them with funding to start income-generating activities.

In Zimbabwe, where Plan works to support communities affected by HIV/AIDS, there are rising numbers of reports of sexual abuse of minors, teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases amongst children and young people. The widespread belief that having sex with a virgin is a cure for HIV/AIDS makes girls more vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse, and thus to contracting HIV[11]. More and more young people are getting infected. And due to inter-generational sexual relationships between young girls and older men girls are five times more likely to get infected than boys.

Plan's response

Plan helps to spread awareness, by supporting projects that use education and creative media such as radio, television, theatre, and dance to inform them about HIV/AIDS. In Zimbabwe, for example, Plan is teaching children and young people about HIV/AIDS issues through drama and music workshops at school. In Malawi, Plan has got young people involved in writing articles for a newspaper called 'Let's Talk' about HIV/AIDS and how it affects them. This gives young people an opportunity to share information, ideas and knowledge about HIV/AIDS, but crucially it gives them a voice rather than just handing them the information.

Panos/Crispin Hughes

The general health of children orphaned by AIDS' suffers: they are more likely to be malnourished, have less access to immunisation, and have greater workloads. They are also more likely to suffer damage to their emotional and cognitive development[12]. Yet, every day 6,000 children around the world are orphaned by HIV/AIDS[13].

Children's lives become increasingly difficult even before their parents die of AIDS, since households living with HIV/AIDS are more likely to experience severe poverty. As the parent or carer becomes too ill to work, income is reduced. At the same time as household earnings diminish, expenditure on medicine and treatment rises. Families are forced to use savings, if they have them, sell land or animals, borrow money, or seek help from the extended family. In South Africa and Zambia, studies of already poor AIDS-affected households showed that monthly income fell between 66 to 80 per cent as a result of having to cope with AIDS[14].

Plan's response

Plan works to provide care and support for children and families affected by AIDS, including treatment of opportunistic infections, whenever possible. In recent years, Plan's AIDS programs have provided assistance to orphans and vulnerable children, as well as voluntary HIV counselling and testing, assistance to people living with AIDS, and psychosocial support to HIV-positive parents and guardians.

Education is also interrupted because children have to stay at home to care for sick relatives, or have to go out to earn money. Being deprived of access to education affects children's futures by denying them the chance of improved employment prospects when they are older. Girls suffer first, as they are normally taken out of school and given the burden of caring for a sick adult or younger sibling. Girls without an education

are more likely to have to sell sex to make a living when they are older. A survey in Kenya found that 52 per cent of orphans were not in school, compared to only 2 per cent of non-orphaned children who were not enrolled[15]. Likewise, a household survey in Kampala, Uganda reported that in 1990, 47 per cent of households with orphans did not have enough money to send their children to school, compared with 10 per cent of other households[16].


Panos/Peter Barker

In addition to the psychological trauma of losing one's parents, children who lose their parents to HIV/AIDS are often stigmatised or ostracised by others in their community. They can be subject to abuse, excluded from school, and even risk being abandoned by their subsequent carers, leading to increased vulnerability. The issue of stigma is a particular problem in Asia, where the epidemic is new and growing fast. In Asia, HIV is most common in the poorest and most socially discriminated-against groups, which makes it even more difficult for children affected by HIV, since they are identified with groups such as sex workers and injecting drug users who are already discriminated against and marginalised[17].

Children living in AIDS-affected areas are also exposed to the broader social and economic consequences for the community as its working population dies. In the first 10 months of 1998, Zambia lost 1,300 teachers to HIV/AIDS, equivalent to two-thirds of the total that could be trained annually[18]. The same is occurring in the health sector. As HIV/AIDS increases the demand on health services, Malawi and Zambia are experiencing five-fold increases in health-worker sickness and death rates[19].

Plan's response

Plan works with projects that encourage parents to designate guardians and write wills to ensure that their property is inherited by their widow or children. A project in Uganda, in association with the Federation of Women Lawyers, assists families in making clear plans to provide for their children's basic needs after a parent dies. The project also includes legal awareness sessions, basic legal training for community volunteers, court representation and support in writing wills and memory books.

The project is empowering some of the most vulnerable people in society to achieve social justice and equitable recognition under the law. It has widened the accessibility of legal knowledge to rural communities and reduced the taboo against will writing. Voluntary HIV testing has increased because people now know they can receive free legal services if they have been tested.

In addition, few people in poorer communities in sub-Saharan Africa make wills because of the taboo against it; making a will is seen as a prediction of death. This means that a deceased person's property will often be grabbed by other family members or other members of the community, leaving the widow and children without any means of support. In a survey in two districts of Uganda of families affected by HIV/AIDS, half the adults identified property grabbing as a problem. Widows are most likely to have their property seized. At least one in four widows in the Uganda survey said they had lost property when their partner died, compared with 1 in 14 widowers[20]. Even where the inheritance rights of women and children are spelled out in law, such rights are difficult to claim and are poorly enforced.

Teenagers are not just affected by the loss of parents and teachers. Many become infected themselves. In Kenya one of the groups experiencing the fastest rate of infection is teenage girls who become infected by their older husbands.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 6

1. States Parties recognise that every child has the inherent right to life.
2. States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.

Article 24

1. States Parties recognise the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services.

11. Substance abuse

The transition to adulthood is a vulnerable time for teenagers. They are keen for new experiences as they search for an identity and independence from their parents, and are susceptible to low self-esteem and peer pressure. These factors make the teenage years the time when young people are most likely to experiment with cigarettes, alcohol, drugs or solvents. Some will leave it at that: experimentation. Others will continue and develop damaging addictions.

There is a severe lack of systematic surveys about the extent of drug abuse among teenagers. Information is sporadic and it is hard to draw international comparisons. Household surveys are not particularly helpful because children and teenagers are unlikely to admit drug use in front of their parents. School surveys are more effective because children are more likely to be open. But they only cover specific populations, and crucially do not cover those young people who are not in school at all, who may well be even more at risk of drug abuse[1].

A 1999 survey by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime collected data from 80 countries around the world. It found that significant portions of the world's teenagers and young people are being exposed to a culture that appears to be more tolerant of drug use.

Globally, 13.5 per cent of youth aged 15-24 have tried cannabis at least once (although that average hides individual figures varying from 1.7 per cent in Peru to 37 per cent in the UK); an average of 1.9 per cent have taken cocaine at least once (again, this average hides differences: 0.8 per cent in Colombia; 4.5 per cent in Kenya)[2]. A study of teenage children in Uzbekistan found that three per cent had used drugs, some of them from the age of eleven, and another two per cent were interested in trying[3].

The nature and extent of drug use vary across regions and countries, often depending on availability. Cannabis and solvents are widely available and cheap, and often the most frequently-used. But in parts of South America, where coca paste and crack are cheaply available, these are more popular. The biggest increase in the last few years has been in the use of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine. The use of ecstasy, amphetamines and methamphetamines is growing particularly in East and South East Asia[4].

The UN's survey cited young people's unease at their prospects in a competitive world of increasingly rapid social and technological change as a push factor towards drug abuse. At the same time as this intensifying pressure to be successful and personally fulfilled, young people are faced with the weakening of traditional values and family ties. They are also bombarded with a mass media culture that appears to be more tolerant of certain drugs, creating the impression that recreational use of soft drugs in particular is acceptable[5].

In the US, the number of adolescents aged 12 to 17 receiving treatment for substance abuse rose consistently from 1992 to 2002. In 1992, adolescents represented six per cent of all treatment admissions. By 2002, this proportion had grown to nine per cent; nearly two-thirds of adolescent admissions in 2002 reported marijuana as the primary drug they were abusing[6].

Marginalised teenagers are the most susceptible to drug abuse, since drugs are a way of coping with poverty, unemployment, neglect, violence and sexual abuse. Drug use is on the increase among marginalised populations as poverty forces people out of the countryside and into growing urban slum populations across the developing world[7]. A survey in Sao Paulo, Brazil, found that nearly 24 per cent of 9 to 18 year olds living in poverty had tried inhalants[8].

Street children, working children, refugee and displaced children, child soldiers and sexually exploited children may turn to drugs for simple functional reasons: to stay awake, get to sleep, reduce hunger, and numb physical or emotional pain. The most frequently used drugs among street children are inhalants: household or industrial products such as cigarette lighter fluid, paint thinner or glue whose fumes are sniffed or breathed. Inhalants are usually the first drug that children try, and they open the way to abuse of other substances. The earlier that drug use starts, the more likely it is to be problematic, and that more drugs will be tried and they will be used more frequently. Street children can be using inhalants by the age of six or seven[9].


Panos/Melanie Friend

A survey by CWIN, a children's rights organisation in Nepal, found that street children in Kathmandu use heroin, opium, tobacco, marijuana, glue, and mushrooms. All of the children interviewed drink beer, smoke cigarettes and use marijuana – the latter to suppress hunger. Most said that it was their friends who got them into drugs, or they started after watching others take them. Some said that they could not live without some kind of substance to relax the tension they lived with; others that they needed something to give them a kick to deal with the daily challenges to survival that they face. They regarded taking drugs as inevitable while living on the streets[10].

Teenagers who are exploited in the drug trade are highly likely to use drugs. A study by the International Labour Organisation on the drug use of children working in the drug trade in a Philippine city found that only eight per cent of the children did not use drugs; that nearly one in four used drugs every day; that 35 per cent started using at 13 or younger; and 22 per cent started using between 14-15 years of age[11].

Because the message about the HIV risks of injecting drugs is spreading, injecting drug use is decreasing among young people, and the average age of first injecting is going up. However, the link between drug use and HIV/AIDS persists. In Brazil, where the incidence of HIV is rising, 36 per cent of new infections among young people are among those who have injected drugs[12].

Teenagers who are not injecting users but who use other drugs or alcohol can put themselves at risk of contracting HIV by having sex when they are under the influence of drugs and less likely to use contraception. A UNICEF survey of HIV risk behaviour among vulnerable young people in Albania found that in a population of young drugs users aged 10-24, 81 per cent had had sex when on drugs, and that only three per cent use condoms every time they have sex[13].

Tobacco and alcohol

Teenagers turn to cigarettes and alcohol for many of the same reasons that they use drugs: curiosity, boredom and to forget their problems. However, their easier availability and the fact that they are an acceptable part of adult life means that a larger proportion of children and teenagers have tried them.

A UNICEF poll of children and adolescents aged nine to 17 in East Asia and the Pacific found that two out of five had tried smoking, and one in four had tried drinking. Twenty per cent of the respondents said they knew children their own age who were addicted to smoking. This ranged from ten per cent in Cambodia to 35 per cent in Papua New Guinea and 50 per cent in Mongolia. The figures for children who knew somebody addicted to alcohol were lower, at seven per cent overall[14].

Research into substance abuse by teenagers in Uzbekistan found that 20 per cent smoked regularly and 25 per cent used alcohol regularly. Those who smoked and drank were more likely to be in the group that used drugs[15].

A study in the US found that on average, young people began drinking at age 13. It reported that 13 per cent of teenagers aged 12 to 17 had experienced a serious problem related to drinking in the previous year, and that six per cent had built up a tolerance to the effects of alcohol[16]. The study also found that drinking rates among girls had caught up with those of boys. Teenage girls tend to turn to drink for different reasons to boys. They are much more susceptible to peer pressure, and are more likely to suffer depression than boys, which can lead to drinking. They may also be introduced to drink by older boyfriends. Risk factors for

drinking in both boys and girls include alcoholism in a parent or older sibling, and lack of communication, support and monitoring from parents[17].


Panos/Martin Adler

Taking up smoking as a child or teenager means that the addiction to cigarettes starts early. A survey of 12 developing or transitional countries found that about 20 per cent of school children in these countries are regular smokers[18]. Nearly a quarter of smokers start their first cigarette after the age of 10, and it is estimated that between 80,000 and 100,000 young people start smoking every day. If current trends in smoking continue, 250 million children alive now will die from smoking-related disease[19].

Smoking is starting to decrease in the industrialised world, but in the developing world it continues to grow. Tobacco companies have done projections about where their income will be coming from by 2008: the growth will all be in Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia[20]. And it is young people who will need to take up smoking in order to provide a new source of addicted customers as the old ones die. So while industrialised countries are now seeing advertising and smoking bans and lawsuits, in many developing and transition countries the tobacco companies' marketing activities towards young people are reported to continue aggressively. In 2000 a BBC investigation reported that the British tobacco company, British American Tobacco (BAT), was actively targeting teenagers in the Gambia by holding beach events for young people in school holidays at which free cigarettes were given out[21].

According to the UN, no particular strategy to prevent substance abuse by teenagers has been consistently successful. However, there is some consensus among young people and experts about what is needed. The approach needs to be tailored to specific groups, and needs to include multiple strategies that combine different approaches such as improving knowledge, promoting health, and building self-esteem. Adolescents want to be taught specific strategies on how to resist peer pressure, and they want to be seen as a resource in combating drugs, rather than as the source of the problem.

Many countries already provide information through schools or the media, but much of it on an ad hoc basis. Information about substance abuse needs to be a regular part of the school curriculum, and it needs to occur before children reach the ages when they are most at risk of peer pressure to try cigarettes, alcohol and drugs.

Teenagers want the facts rather than scare tactics. If they have already tried drugs and alcohol and know what they feel like, they need information that does not contradict their experience, otherwise it will not seem relevant. Involving teenagers in peer-led initiatives works, since so many of them get their information about alcohol and drugs from their contemporaries. But prevention programs also need to include families and communities[22]. The study of schoolchildren in Uzbekistan found that one of the risk factors for substance abuse was being in a family where it was difficult to get information from parents and where conversations about the risks of drugs and alcohol did not take place[23].

On the smoking front, the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, a treaty to tackle the 4.9 million preventable tobacco-related deaths each year, is collecting ratifications and will probably enter into force by the end of 2004. It will set international standards on tobacco price and tax increases, tobacco advertising and sponsorship, labelling, illicit trade and second-hand smoke. States party to the treaty will have to comprehensively ban tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship[24].

Plan's response

Children themselves can get involved in campaigning against those who sell addictive substances. Children supported by Plan India have been making films about the world around them. Saroj presented a film called 'Addicted Innocence' when she was 15. "After showing our film on the growing trend of children addicted to chewing tobacco at a Children's Film Festival, a group of children sent a petition to their local government pressurising them to do something about this hazardous trend. As a result street sellers have been banned from selling chewing tobacco within 100 metres of the schools," she says.

Plan's programs include work on substance abuse. In Colombia, it runs projects in schools to try to prevent children and teenagers using and abusing drugs. Children are taught about the risks of drugs and how to combat peer pressure to take them.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 24

1. States Parties recognise the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services.

Article 33

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislative, administrative, social and educational measures, to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances as defined in the relevant international treaties, and to prevent the use of children in the illicit production and trafficking of such substances.

12. Work

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says that governments must protect children (including teenagers under 18) from economic exploitation, and from work that is hazardous, that interferes with their education, or is harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

Yet it is estimated that 246 million under-18s are engaged in child labour, and two thirds of them – 171 million – are doing work that is hazardous, such as working with dangerous machinery or pesticides and chemicals[1]. Children can be involved in child labour from a very young age but the older and stronger they become the more likely it is that they will be put to work. The most common type of work is agriculture, followed by domestic labour. In sub-Saharan Africa, nearly one in three children under the age of 15 work. In the Asia and Pacific regions, 19 per cent of children work[2].

Debate on teenage labour is polarised between those who disapprove of all child work and those who promote the child's right to choose. Plan's own view is that child labour should be eliminated in the long-term. However, in the short to medium-term a balance must be found between the existing economic necessity of children, especially teenagers, to work, and protecting teenagers' rights so that they can develop their full potential. Most parents would prefer not to send their children to work but millions face the choice of seeing their teenage children work or starve. So whilst working towards the longer goal of eliminating child labour, the immediate goal is to ensure teenagers' right to work free from exploitation.

Plan's response

The most important part of Plan's long-term work on eliminating child labour is providing child labourers with access to education, even if it is not the formal school-based variety. Children who are in education are less likely to be exploited commercially. And children who are already working will benefit from the opportunity that education brings to improve their situation. Where children have no choice but to work, such as in the parts of sub-Saharan Africa where the AIDS pandemic has created a huge increase in the number of children who must provide for their families, Plan helps them get access to health and informal education facilities until they can return to formal schooling or until their family income improves.

It is important to distinguish between teenage work, teenage labour, and the worst forms of teenage labour. The majority of the world's teenagers are engaged in some form of economic activity, whether it is unpaid household chores or an after-school job. Many societies, in Africa for example, put high value on teenagers working at home or on the family farm. This is not perceived as harmful, rather as socially necessary work which is of benefit to the teenager[3].

Light work can be helpful to a teenager's family, and help the child to develop skills and responsibility, without being harmful or depriving him or her of education. Plan refers to teenage labour when it is talking about work that deprives a young teenager of an education and the future choices that education brings. It is this teenage labour, and particularly the most harmful forms of child labour, which needs to be eliminated, focusing particularly on bringing an end to the worst forms of child and teenage labour.

Between 8 million and 20 million children are reported to be involved in the worst forms of child labour: forced and bonded labour; armed conflict; prostitution; pornography and trafficking[4].

Research conducted for Plan Ghana found that children below the age of 16 are working full-time on the cocoa farms in hazardous circumstances. In order to stamp out this practice Ghana's government is trying to prosecute cocoa farmers engaging in such practices and to place children in school or at least in a safer working environment.

However, in order to prosecute and place the children in the right environment they need to know the child's age. For teenagers without a birth certificate, this is very difficult[5].

If they do not have a birth certificate, teenagers cannot prove their nationality, which makes repatriation efforts for those who are trafficked across borders into commercial exploitation more difficult. Proof of name and nationality is also required in many countries for school enrolment and access to medical and welfare services.

Plan's response

In Bangladesh Plan is supporting government to ensure birth registration through advocacy and technical support, and raising awareness at different levels of the local government. Now parents and government officials are more aware of the importance of birth registration, and the number of birth registrations has been steadily increasing.

Teenage labourers endure physical and psychological maltreatment, under-payment, poverty and debt, isolation, and being treated as objects rather than people. They lose the chance to learn and play and so their emotional and social development is hindered. Human Rights Watch reports how children working at rug looms are left disabled with eye damage, lung disease, stunted growth, and a susceptibility to arthritis when older[6].

A study in the Philippines found that nearly a quarter of working children have experienced injuries in their workplaces[7].

A survey in Nepal, where a quarter of children aged six to 14 are economically active, found that children were working in 65 different sectors, including the carpet and garment industries, confectionery, brick kilns, roads and building construction, transportation, stone quarrying, mining, manufacturing and domestic service. In rural areas of Nepal, children work in farming, plantation, cattle grazing and bonded agricultural labour. Landlessness, poor access to resources and production, gender inequality, unfair distribution of land, unemployment, and environmental degradation which is forcing people off the land are all contributing factors to the child labour problem in Nepal[8].

Plan's response

Plan works to address child labour by supporting microfinance programs that help poor families to sustain household financial security so that it is not so necessary for children to go out to work. Access to small loans and saving facilities enable poor people to increase their household incomes, build assets, and reduce their vulnerability to the crises that form much of their daily lives. They allow poor people to plan for the future and send their children to school. Plan supports 26 active microfinance programs in 14 countries.

Alf Berg

Bonded child labour has deep cultural roots in India, Nepal and Pakistan. Parents may hand over bonded children in repayment of a loan or for a payment from the employer. The children are then forced to work as if they were slaves, are unable to go home or even leave their workplace, and with no sign of their 'debt' being paid off.

Plan's response

In Togo, Plan has begun a program aiming to stop the trafficking of children to work as domestic labourers. Middlemen have found it relatively easy to entice families to send their children abroad for offers of paid work and a good education. Such promises are often false, and children find themselves working long hours for little money on agricultural plantations or in domestic service. The program is piloting income-generation schemes to improve household earnings. It is also providing support to affected children, research and advocacy, and capacity building assistance for local organisations involved in the fight against child trafficking.

In India, Plan works with local non-governmental organisations in nine states to tackle the causes of child labour by providing access to education services and encouraging drop outs to re-enter the school system. In some places children provide critical family income and it is not possible to persuade families to survive without it. In these cases Plan and partners have developed out-of-school education programs for after work so that children do not miss out on the education that could help them and their families make their way out of poverty.

Between the ages of 5 and 14, girls are as likely as boys to be working; after that age the ratio of boys to girls increases. However, girls are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, particularly sexual exploitation, and face different problems to boys because of the low status given to them in many societies. For example, girls may be working the same hours outside of the home as boys, but are also expected to take responsibility for unpaid household chores and caring tasks at home[9].

The majority of domestic workers are girls. Domestic work is one of the most hidden forms of child labour, with girls at increased risk of sexual abuse and of being trafficked across borders. There may be as many as 10 million child domestic workers globally, with 700,000 in Indonesia, 200,000 in Kenya and 250,000 in Haiti[10]. (See Section 10 Sexual exploitation)

In armed conflicts in Asia, Africa and the Americas, children are forcibly recruited (although a few also volunteer) to be used as soldiers in armed groups, and also as cooks, porters and sexual slaves. (See Section 7 Girl and boy soldiers)

Plan's response

In Ecuador, Plan has supported the local organisation called Fundación Niñez y Vida in Quito to assist families with working children through formal, vocational and non-formal education, recreational facilities, medical services and micro-finance activities.

In Vietnam, Plan is working on income-generation activities, providing family counselling and has extended basic primary education services for children returning home to Thanh Hoa and Hung Yen from Hanoi where many travel in search of work to financially support their families. It plans to expand its work to prevent child trafficking, especially in domestic child labour.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges governments to protect those aged under 18 "from economic exploitation, and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. It also has articles prohibiting slavery and trafficking.

The International Labour Organisation has passed two conventions on child labour:

Convention 138, adopted in 1973, sets a number of minimum ages depending on the type of employment or work. The first principle is that the minimum age should not be less than the age for completing compulsory schooling and in no event less than age 15. For countries whose economic and educational facilities are insufficiently developed, the age can be set initially at 14. The second principle is that a higher minimum age, of not less than 18, should be set for hazardous work. The types of employment or work deemed to be hazardous shall be determined by national laws or regulations or by the competent authority, leaving it to the individual countries to determine the content of these activities. In the case of light work, the minimum age can be set at 13 years, or 12 years where the economy and educational facilities are insufficiently developed.

Convention 182, adopted in 1999, calls for the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour: all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage, serfdom and forced or compulsory labour; forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; use of a child for prostitution, production of pornography or pornographic performances; use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs; and, work which is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

13. Disability

The UN estimates that there are up to 500 million disabled people worldwide. UNICEF suggests 120 million of these are children and adolescents[1]. Other agencies estimate that the number is nearer 150 million[2], while others still, believe the real number is as high as 180 million[3]. While no one knows the precise figure, what is known is that the number of children with disabilities is rising as the world's population increases.

A World Health Organization report prepared by the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Disability noted that "In the majority of countries, at least one out of 10 persons has a physical, mental or sensory impairment, and at least 25 per cent of the entire population are adversely affected by the presence of disabilities."[4]

There are of course, various causes of disability[5]. Many disabilities and impairments occur before or during birth such as hereditary defects, birth complications, genetic imbalances and other health conditions, it is estimated that up to 50 per cent of disabilities in developing countries are the result of potentially preventable illnesses or injuries[6], and that half of all disabled peopled become disabled in the first 15 years of life[7].

Numerous studies suggest that the major causes of disability in the developing world include: malnutrition, infectious diseases, non-infectious diseases, war and congenital diseases. The common denominator for many of these factors is poverty, and more than any other group, "disabled children are disproportionately likely to live in poverty."[8] In fact, some reports suggest that up to 82 per cent of persons with disabilities live below the poverty line in developing countries[9].

Clearly, a strong link exists between poverty and disability. Many infectious and non-infectious diseases, for example, are caused by poverty-related factors such as the drinking of polluted water, poor sanitation and poor hygiene[10]. One estimate states that up to 100 million people, have been disabled through malnutrition alone[11]. However, while disability and impairment can be caused by poverty the reverse is also true. A youth with a disability, for example, may require expensive medical treatment or therapy etc, which places additional demands on a family's income, thus, impoverishing the family further. In addition to the financial burdens, there are a number of social consequences for a family to face. These include increased care responsibilities, the social stigma of having a disabled child, and some people believing that the disability or impairment is 'catching' and, therefore, refusing to work, or undertake business with, the family.

Conflict

Armed conflict is an increasing cause of disability among youth in many countries, and especially so in conflicts which deliberately target civilians. The use of modern weapons, such as cluster bombs and landmines, which are indiscriminate in their targeting, is the biggest cause of disability to children living in conflict-affected areas. A study into the impact of armed conflict on children reported that although millions of children were killed in armed conflict, "three times as many are seriously injured or permanently disabled by it."[12] UNICEF estimated that between four and five million children were disabled or maimed by conflict between 1985 and 1995[13], while the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) estimates that up

to six million children have been seriously injured or permanently disabled by conflict in the last decade alone[14]. In Afghanistan, prior to 9/11, landmines had already disabled 60,000 children[15]. In Angola meanwhile, 8,000 children are landmine amputees[16].

Disability can also occur when children are forced to work at a young age in hazardous conditions, with little regard for their safety. A survey by the International Labour Organisation has revealed that between 5 and 20 per cent of working minors suffer injuries or illnesses that cause them to stop working permanently. This is because "their youth and comparative vulnerability renders them more susceptible to various work-related injuries and illnesses than adults doing the same work. Also, because "they are not yet matured mentally, they are less aware of the potential risks involved in their specific occupations or at the workplace itself."[17]

Prejudice

While the causes of disability may vary, one thing remains constant – discrimination and prejudice. Throughout the world, many disabled adolescents will have grown up experiencing a wide array of discrimination. In many instances, this prejudice continues into adulthood.

The vast majority of disabled teenagers grow up to become disabled adults. Many disabled children, however, believe that they will grow up to become non-disabled adults[18]. Therefore, when a disabled child becomes a teenager, and the reality of their future becomes apparent, it can often be a period when depression and low self esteem sets in. This low self-esteem is compounded by their lack of access to participate fully in society.

Low self-esteem is exacerbated by neglect and abuse. One report suggests that disabled people are four times more likely to be neglected and physically abused than non-disabled people, and that they are three times more likely to be emotionally abused[19]. In Scotland, one in every five disabled people has experienced either verbal or physical harassment[20]. But it is not just adults that abuse disabled teenagers. Many are subjected to abuse and bullying by their peers. A UK study has revealed that disabled children identified 'getting picked on' as a universal experience. "The children documented physical, emotional, and verbal bullying – name calling, being kicked and hit and being excluded from peer groups."[21]
Such experiences are repeated around the world. (See Section 5 Bullying and punishment)

Disabled adolescents are amongst the most disadvantaged people anywhere. Because teenagers are often excluded from participation in decisions that affect their lives, disabled teenagers suffer a "double-denial of their rights."[22] Too often disability condemns a child to social isolation, loneliness, a lack of friendships, a denial of a voice, and a lack of opportunities to participate fully or equally in society. In many parts of the world "prevailing attitudes perceive the life of a disabled child as being of less worth, less importance and less potential than other lives. All over the world disability is stigmatised."[23]

Plan's response

Plan Uganda is in the process of launching children's advisory boards in each area where it works to increase the direct participation of children in decision-making. Each board will include at least one disabled child.

Disabled teenagers, and in particular girls, are often isolated from peer groups. They receive little or no education leaving them with few real prospects to improve their lives. The result is a lack of self-esteem, practical skills, or economic independence. Disabled adolescents have also been described as 'invisible' because programs that are designed for young adults rarely include those with disabilities. Likewise, where programs run by governments and voluntary organisations that have been designed for disabled people do exist, they are usually for either young children or adults. Adolescents, therefore, often miss out. Although they are not excluded from the child or adult-focused groups, often their inclusion in a program is arbitrary. Consequently, adolescents with disabilities can be alienated from the few disability support groups that do exist. This is of particular importance considering that their social, educational and economic needs during this period of rapid physical and psychological development, is so great. Indeed,


Panos/Giacomo Pirozzi

program organisers have reported a marked decrease in the participation of adolescents at these groups[24]. Disabled adolescents therefore, often 'become invisible'. It is no wonder, therefore, that "of all groups with disability in the developing world, the one group about which we know the least is disabled adolescents and youth."[25]

Such discrimination means it is harder for young disabled people to find employment, gain access to education, healthcare, and credit. Such discrimination renders life, already difficult, much harder still for disabled adolescents.

"Disabled children (and any child can become a disabled child) are essentially the same as other children – they have the same rights, the same needs and the same aspirations: it is the society and environment around them that treats them differently, excludes them, and discriminates against them. That's why it is harder for the disabled child to access the same rights as his or her non-disabled peer." Emma Cain, Action on Disability and Development[26].

The reasons why it is more common for those with disabilities not to attend school vary. Sometimes, it is because parents fear that their disabled child will not be able to cope either mentally or physically, or, that they will face ridicule, or even, that the disclosure of a disabled child in a family will affect the marriage prospects of a sibling. It can also be because parents feel that because their child has a disability, their future employment opportunities will be so low that it is not worth the expense of sending them to school in the first place.

Plan's response

Plan works on disability issues in numerous countries around the world. In Sri Lanka, for example, it works with the Children's Resource Centre to provide education that is tailored to the needs and learning ability of each of its 200 pupils. Much of the tuition is based on creative subjects such as music and drama but practical tuition is also given in subjects such as sewing, woodwork, kitchen, and packing work.

Formal education for disabled children and adolescents in the developing world is rare. Only two per cent have access to education, and according to UN estimates the literacy rate for people with disabilities globally is just three per cent[27]. In Zimbabwe, for example, 52 per cent of disabled children receive no education, while in Asia approximately 90 per cent of blind children have no access at all[28]. In Egypt, just one per cent of disabled children attend school. Likewise, in Mozambique just one in every hundred deaf children gain an education. In Vietnam, the situation was until just recently, even worse. Just "0.001 per cent of disabled children had access to any kind of educational provision."[29]

The reason for this is simple. Governments too discriminate against those with disabilities. Even where provision is made, often the only option for a disabled child is a specialist school. But for the majority of teenagers with disabilities attending the same schools as other young people could be an option if their needs are incorporated into the mainstream. Often the attitudes of non-disabled people are a bigger barrier than the disability itself.

In countries as diverse as Japan, Argentina and countries of the former USSR, access and entitlement to education is determined by diagnostic tests alone. "Typically, the views of parents and children and the actual needs and abilities of the child are routinely ignored."[30] To calculate the number of children that attend school in Vietnam, "the number of disabled children ... is first subtracted from the total number of children in the district."[31] Disabled children, therefore, are not even considered suitable for education. Meanwhile, in a survey of 80 countries by the Special Rapporteur for Disability, 10 countries did not have any legal provisions in place for guaranteeing education to either disabled children or adolescents[32]. UNESCO, meanwhile, revealed that 18 countries actually excluded disabled children from public education by law[33]. Such discrimination by governments is as scandalous as it is widespread and is in clear violation of various UNCRC articles including: Article 29: Education suited to the child's talents; Articles 2: Non-discrimination, and Article 3: Best interests of the child.

So, having not attended school, "disabled young people are at a significant disadvantage in obtaining apprenticeships and job training placements. This in turn makes it difficult for them to obtain work, earn

an income, or financially support a family."[34] In Vietnam, only two per cent of disabled youth between 11 and 17 ever receive any vocational training, making it nearly impossible for them to find gainful employment[35]. In Tunisia, 85 per cent of disabled people over 15 are unemployed. In Zimbabwe, less than one per cent contribute actively to the economy while in the UK and US, 67 per cent of disabled people are unemployed[36]. In Uganda, a study found that disabled employees were usually the last hired and the first fired[37]. In addition, the negative attitudes of employers and the assumptions they make about the limited abilities of disabled people means that potential employers are often reluctant to take on a disabled person in the first place. Thus, for young disabled people it is difficult to develop any income-generating skills let alone become financially independent. This means that disabled adolescents are not in a position to be able to support elderly parents financially. As disabled girls are often deemed unmarriageable, they are not able to secure their future through a husband's income. It is therefore not surprising to learn that "disabled people have lower education and income levels than the rest of the population. They are more likely to have incomes below poverty levels and less likely to have savings and assets than the non-disabled population. These findings hold for both developing and developed countries."[38]

Gaining access to healthcare for many disabled children and adolescents can also be difficult. In some countries this lack of healthcare can be a matter of life and death. Indeed, in some countries, "90 per cent of disabled children do not survive beyond the age of twenty"[39], while 90 per cent of intellectually impaired children will not reach their fifth birthday[40]. In the developing world overall, 97 per cent of disabled children do not even receive the most rudimentary rehabilitation services[41]. In Vietnam, an estimated one-third of all disabled children have never received any treatment for their disability while just one in five has the vital rehabilitative aids they require. Indeed, less than 10 per cent of disabled youths with movement disabilities in Vietnam have access to any rehabilitative device because of limited availability and excessive costs[42]. Access to and costs of transportation to hospitals and clinics exacerbate the healthcare problem further.

Clearly, disability is not a sectoral issue. It is an issue that cuts across all sectors. It affects both the rich and the poor, and the old and the young alike. However, any initiative that is aimed at improving the lives and opportunities of children around the world is bound to fail if the input and participation of disabled children is ignored – just as an initiative would fail if it did not include girls.

Disabled teenagers have enormous potential, and most have to struggle hard to overcome other people's prejudice and discrimination in order to realise their capabilities.

Plan's response

Egypt

Fourteen-year-old Iman was born with Down Syndrome in a slum area of Alexandria in Egypt. Iman's mother took her to the local community centre for disabled children, which is supported by Plan. At first Iman could not talk let alone socialise with her new classmates. But 18 months later, after regular communications sessions and a range of other support, the change in her is marked. Today Iman can dress herself, eat and drink without help, read and write and solve maths problems. Iman's determination has truly helped her reach her potential[43].

Bangladesh

In Bangladesh Plan works with the Centre for Disability in Development towards the integration of disabled people into the local community while in the Philippines it works with children suffering from visual, hearing, orthopaedic/motor, and mental impairments.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

It is important to realise that all Articles in the CRC apply equally to all children, and thus, disabled children as well. This is confirmed in Article 2, "States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth ... to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind" and that States "shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination." In addition, Article 23 specifically concerns itself with disability and says, "States Parties recognise that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions, which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community."

14. Education

The universal right to education is such a crucial one that if it were fulfilled it would go a significant way towards reducing many of the other problems highlighted in this report. Not only does it bring learning, self-confidence, earning power, a sense of personal potential, social and negotiation skills but, education is the key to alleviating poverty and bringing about sustainable development. It improves health, and helps young people to protect themselves from AIDS, exploitation and child labour. It is probably the single most pressing development issue.

This is why governments have made so many declarations about it. In 1990 at the World Conference on Education for All at Jomtien in Thailand, 155 governments promised education for all by 2000. At the 1995 UN World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, governments and international organisations committed themselves to removing discrimination against girls in education by 2005, and to make primary education universal by 2015. The Millennium Development Goals of 2000 promised that as many girls as boys would be in education by 2015, and reaffirmed the goal of universal primary education by 2015.

But promises made at world conferences do not always materialise. On current trends, girls' enrolment will not catch up with boys until 2025, and all African boys and girls will not be in school until 2100[1]. The most frequently cited figures for the number of children out of school are between 100 and 120 million worldwide. But this refers only to children of primary school age. There are probably another 100 to 150 million adolescents aged 12 to 14 not in school. And that's not counting the further 50 to 150 million who are enrolled in school but are attending fewer than half of their classes, and the additional 50 to 150 million who may be sitting at their desks but are not learning enough, so are not really getting an education. This means a potential 300 million to 500 million children who are not being educated[2].

It is particularly concerning that so many girls are not in school – about 65 million girls worldwide, which is as many as all of the school age girls in North America and Europe[3]. Globally, young women are more than 60 per cent likely to be illiterate than young men[4]. There are many reasons for this imbalance, most of them connected to the social position of girls. When it comes to allocation of resources, boys come first. The factor that stops most parents from sending their children to school is money. If family budgets do not permit all of the children to go to school, it is the girls who will stay at home. The heavy domestic workload of girls means that even if they do go to school their studies may be interrupted; but many are kept at home to help out.

Collecting water, for example, can take up a large proportion of the day and it is a task done by girls across Africa and Asia. In Tanzania, a project which brought water to within 15 minutes' walk rather than an hour, as previously, resulted in an increase of 12 per cent in school enrolment[5].

Taklitin Walet Farati, an non-governmental organisation fieldworker in Mali who tries to persuade girls' parents to let them go to school, told Oxfam that the opportunity costs are a significant barrier to girls' education. "I'd go and check why girls weren't attending school, to be told by their mothers, 'We can't let our daughters go to school. We need them in the home. They are our hands and feet!'"[6]

Pregnancy and early marriage prevent adolescent girls from continuing with school. If there is a long journey to school, parents may be reluctant to allow daughters to attend because of the risks to their safety. And although physical violence such as bullying affects both boys and girls, for girls there is the added risk of

sexual abuse. A survey in Malawi, Ghana and Zimbabwe found that sexual aggression against girls at school was going unpunished, and a study in Ecuador found that 22 per cent of girls experienced sexual abuse in an educational setting[7]. A lack of female teachers can make girls feel less secure at school. The majority of children who lack birth certificates are girls, and this can prevent access to schools or to examinations[8].

Yet the price to pay for girls not being educated is huge. Babies born to mothers who do not have formal education are twice as likely to die from malnutrition or to not reach their fifth birthdays, than babies born to mothers who finished primary school. Even if mothers have only two years of formal education, it cuts child deaths by 15 per cent[9]. Educated mothers know that children can be protected from avoidable illnesses with regular check-ups, immunisations and a good diet.

"There is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls," said Kofi Annan[10]. Education is not only vital to prevent child mortality, but is also one of the most effective weapons in the fight against the spread of HIV. If every child completed primary school, 700,000 new cases of HIV in young adults could be prevented each year (about 30 per cent of all new infections in this age group). This would add up to seven million fewer infections over the next decade.

Literate women are three times more likely than illiterate women to know that a healthy looking person can have HIV, and four times more likely to know the main ways to avoid contracting HIV[11]. In 17 countries in Africa and four in Latin America, better educated girls are more likely to delay having sex, and to use a condom. Given that young women in Africa are five times as vulnerable to contracting HIV as young men are, education quite literally saves lives[12].

Boys and girls are more likely to drop out of school if what they are being taught is not relevant to their lives. As well as literacy and numeracy they need life skills and information: on rights, health, gender equality, nutrition, HIV, and peace. School materials currently tend to reinforce gender stereotypes, with women, if present at all, portrayed in traditional roles[13].

Economically, education has obvious benefits. It has been estimated that raising the average education of the labour force by one year increases overall Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by nine per cent, and increases individual farmers' productivity by three to 14 per cent[14]. As well as offering a better economic future, education can protect children from the economic exploitation while they are still young. Being in school is one of the best protections from being trafficked into exploitation, and being a child labourer. A study by the International Labour Organisation into child domestic service found that children regularly cited lack of access to education as a 'push' factor[15].

Michelle Gilbert

Yet despite the close link between the goals of universal education and elimination of child labour, many countries fail to synchronise the school leaving age and the minimum age of employment; in 36 countries the minimum age for employment is lower than the age for compulsory education[16].

In order to get all children into school, it needs to be free. This is an obligation under Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which says that primary education needs to be compulsory and free for all, and that secondary education should be 'available and accessible' to all. But in at least 101 countries, fees are charged for primary schooling[17]. And in 25 countries there is no compulsory age for children to be in school[18].

In order to meet the Millennium Development Goals, governments need to stop talking and start doing. Education needs to be free, and the poorest families need to be compensated for allowing girls to school because the opportunity costs are so high for them. Schools need to be near communities or girls will lose out, and their condition needs to be improved in rural and slum areas, with motivated and trained teachers, the safety and dignity of pupils guaranteed, and functioning systems of sanction against sexual harassment and abuse.

There are a few positive examples of what can be achieved with some political will and an increased education budget. Over the past decade, Bangladesh has raised the proportion of girls in school from 13 per cent to 56 per cent. It did this by making primary education compulsory, abolishing fees for girls in rural areas, and increasing government spending on primary education[19].


Liba Taylor

On the international scale, the Global Campaign for Education was founded in 1999. Teachers and non-government organisations in 150 countries are working together to demand free primary education, more government spending on all levels of education, investment in disadvantaged areas, an increase in aid and debt relief from the north, and for civil society to hold governments and international institutions to account.

Plan's response

In Rajasthan in India, Plan supports non-residential education camps for adolescent girls who have not been to school, to provide intensive education and try to change the community's attitudes to educating girls.

Pushpa, a teenage girl narrating a film made by children about one of these camps, says: "One of the main reasons why most parents don't educate their daughters is the practice of child marriage in the area. I got married four years ago. I will go to my husband's house when I attain puberty. There are a lot of girls in this camp who are married."[20]

Girls attend for six or seven months, and achieve up to fifth grade. There was an overwhelming response to the first camp when it opened in October 2002, with enrolments going over the planned target on just the first day. As well as following the basic curriculum, sessions on disease and reproductive health are taught. Teachers and committee members visit parents to try to persuade them to enrol their other children in the camp. "I am now educated. No one can take advantage of me," said one pupil[21].

Plan runs a similar camp for boys who are too old to go to regular primary school but who have not yet had any education.

"I was not sent to school because I was the eldest child and had to look after my brothers and sisters. I was 10 years old when my mother died. I got married when I was 14. In my husband's house everyone is educated. I really felt out of place. I would wish that I too were educated, that I too could read letters and newspaper. I became a mother at an early age. I was really ashamed of the fact that I was unlettered... [Now] I will not stay behind in any field. I can now do anything." Bhanwari, who learnt to read at a Plan education camp for adolescent girls who had not been to school[22].

Plan has been supporting basic education programs for several decades. It is currently working on education in 45 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean with a wide range of interventions in secondary education as well as early childhood care and development, formal and non-formal primary education.

Plan also works towards the goal of universal birth registration. In some countries, such as Cameroon, Sudan and Burkina Faso, a birth certificate is required in order to enrol in school[23]. Even in countries where a birth certificate is not required to enrol in school, it may be needed later on when children take national examinations, such as in Sri Lanka, or when enrolling in university, such as in Tanzania[24].

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 28

1. States Parties recognise the right of the child to education and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular

(a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all

(b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need

(c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means

(d) Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children

(e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates

15. Having a voice

There are now 1.3 billion people aged 10 to 19 in the world – a fifth of the world's population - and the largest generation of adolescents in history[1]. Four-fifths of them are in developing countries, where teenagers are most likely to be affected by some of the problems discussed in this report[2].

Yet, children and adolescents rarely have any kind of say in the decisions that will affect them. It is vital that their voices are listened to. They are citizens and stakeholders in society. Many undertake a wide range of social responsibilities, such as working or caring for families, and have a right to be listened to and to have their opinions acted on. This applies both within families and on the public stage, in their communities as well as at a national and international level. Plan believes that teenagers have a valid contribution to make on a very wide range of subjects: not just youth issues. They are living in the real world and their perspective is drawn from experience. The future is theirs and they must be allowed a stake in making it.

Participation can mean many different things in different circumstances and contexts. According to UNICEF, in its most basic sense, adolescent participation can be defined as adolescents partaking in and influencing processes, decisions and activities.

In the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, participation is a legal right for all adolescents, and an end in itself. UNICEF's 2001 working paper "The Participation Rights of Adolescents" says: "Because it is a right, it is an inalienable entitlement, not a matter of goodwill or charity. But it is a right, not an obligation. Therefore participation must always be voluntary, and never coerced. Participation is central to the developmental approach, for several reasons. Participation itself is development... The goal of development, and the very purpose of things such as economic growth, education and health, is to be free and able to choose and live the sort of life one wants to live. A community can be considered developed to the extent that it ensures that all its people, including adolescents, are in a position to participate and shape a life of dignity. At the same time, participation is also the means to self development. Adolescents and their communities do not develop by being passive, by simply observing or being told the key truths of development. Through participation, adolescents develop skills, build competencies, form aspirations, gain confidence and attain valuable resources."

"Tune into kids and you'll see who we are, what we can do. Let's have chances to speak out for ourselves because we are the only ones who can make a better world."
Phuong, 16, Vietnam[3]

"Children do have a voice and a unique way of thinking that is different to adults. They do have potential to understand their problems and to solve them, but most don't get the opportunity to express their concerns."
Sonu, 17, India[4]

"We are children, which makes us the experts on ourselves!"
Jowillyn, the Philippines

"We children of today will become the adults of tomorrow,"
Anachao, Thailand

"We may be young but we have some very good ideas. Children can do something if they are given the chance."
Zubeda, 12, Tanzania[5]

The Convention on the Rights of the Child says that children have the right to freedom of expression and freedom of association. Kofi Annan said in 1998: "A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death."[6]


Plan

Policies on children's issues will be more effective if children's views are taken into account when making them: teenagers can provide a real perspective on the problems facing them at home, at school or at work, and suggest solutions which adults would not have considered.

Young people who are asked to express their opinions and feelings, who are listened to by decision makers, and who learn to stand up and say what they believe, gain huge confidence and self-esteem to carry them into their adult lives. This works at the family level as much as in communities or on the political stage. Adolescents who are learning self-esteem and communication gain status within their families and can have more influence over the way they are treated at home. For example, girls in Kenya who have been involved in children's clubs say that their parents trust and respect them more, and there is less gender discrimination at home. Previously, they complained they were treated like domestic servants while their brothers were given few responsibilities[7].

Teenagers also benefit by becoming better able to deal with unfair or threatening situations. They have learnt what their rights are, are more confident in standing up for themselves, and know where to seek advice.

An adolescent girl in India, for example, told Plan that she had encountered a situation of sexual abuse on a public bus. She had shouted loudly at the man, publicly shaming him until he got off the bus. Her new assertiveness worked. She said that she would have been far too timid to do this before taking part in a 'Bal Panchayat' (children's village assembly), which had taught her both knowledge of her rights and the confidence to deal with negative situations and protect herself[8].

And in Gaza, where a group of adolescents have been involved in a computer project, they explained that: "Our mental health has improved. We now have the capacity to be able to give a new image of Palestine to the world. The world thinks we are backward and chaotic. America thinks it is better than us, but we can do things: we can handle advanced knowledge, we can be scientific, we can organise ourselves."[9]

Plan's response

Listening to adolescents is central to Plan's work. Plan has found that teenagers and children's contributions lead to better decisions; that teenagers want to be involved in the issues affecting them because they can learn new skills and become empowered to tackle the neglect and abuse of their rights. They think that teenagers and children often say things that adults would want to say but do not, as well as some things that adults do not want to hear.

Last year, video conferencing allowed children from Vietnam, India, El Salvador, Kenya, and Sweden to address Plan's international board meeting in Washington, DC. "We asked questions without hesitation to the top board members of Plan. It just shows how seriously Plan has taken up children's participation," said Manisha, a member of the children's parliament in Delhi.

Plan Nicaragua has been working with adolescents in 11 institutions known as child protection centres. Campaign committees were formed in the centres, each including a teenager as a member. The campaign committees started awareness-raising campaigns to promote respect for the human rights of the children and teenagers in the centres.

Most of the children and adolescents living in the institutions are there because their parents were too poor to be able to care for them at home. But the majority of the youngsters expressed an overwhelming desire to live with their families. For this reason the campaign highlighted the child's right to a family, and promotes this idea among all institutions responsible for protecting the rights of children in special circumstances.

Media projects

Another way in which Plan facilitates teenagers to speak out is through its media projects. As well as giving teenagers and younger children a platform to express themselves to a wide audience, these programs provide training in broad non-vocational skills such as communication, teamwork, creativity, self-expression, and confidence. They also provide other children and teenagers as well as adults with information they would not otherwise receive.

In India, Plan's 'Children have something to say' video project encouraged children to make films about the issues they thought were most important to them. Teenagers aged 13 to 17 across the country identified the problems affecting young people's lives, such as child labour, early marriage, prostitution, and addiction. They then learnt the skills they needed to make campaigning videos calling for change. They researched, scripted, filmed, and edited the videos, on 36 different subjects. The films have been shown at children's film festivals, on international channels such as the BBC, and – perhaps most importantly – in the communities of the children who made them.

They had an important political impact: the film on the Jogini system, whereby lower caste girls as young as 10 are pressured into become prostitutes for the powerful men of the village, prompted the government to review its laws. Another led to the shutting down of a paper factory in Central India that was poisoning the local water supply. The project received a special award at the UK One World Media Awards. Tony Young, the chair of One World Broadcasting Trust, said at the award ceremony: "In placing a microphone in the hands of children, they [Plan] have given them the authority to question the practices about them, to challenge their treatment and the treatment of their neighbours."[10]

Victor Brott

One girl involved in making the videos said that when she was first approached she was very nervous and turned it down. She was afraid of the technical equipment and her mother discouraged her, saying it was an inappropriate thing for a young girl to be doing. But her friends persuaded her to take part. She was very proud of the interviewing skills she had learned. She had discovered that: "I'm good at making people talk. Now I feel I can achieve anything and I know I've contributed something important to society. When my mother saw the video, she couldn't believe what we had done." She is now interested in studying communications and becoming a news broadcaster[11].

In West Africa, Plan's radio campaign 'I am a child but I have my rights too!' covers Burkina Faso, Guinea, Togo, Mali, Senegal, Guinea Bissau and Benin. Children aged six to 18 raise awareness and promote children's rights through five-minute radio stories that are specific to each country's culture. They are a mixture of education and entertainment and include animal characters from a country's folklore as a way of creating a comfortable atmosphere in which to talk about difficult issues such as child trafficking and AIDS. The shows are broadcast by up to 20 radio stations in each country[12].

"I have learned a lot from presenting the radio show. I know all my rights and now my brothers and sisters do too. At home I feel my parents respect me more and more because of this experience. And now that I know all my rights they know they can't abuse my rights,"
says 15 year-old Arnaud, who hosts a radio show in Burkina Faso.

In Colombia, children are writing and producing a magazine, Caja Mágica (Magic Box). Not only do they learn journalistic skills, but also a knowledge of children's rights. Child editors of other children's magazines supported by Plan in Senegal, Indonesia and India have gone on to become distributors of the magazines, or have set up community organisations promoting child or human rights, or have gone on to train to become journalists. Groups of child editors in Colombia also organise training sessions for other children and discuss issues such as nutrition, violence, drug addiction, and the lack of green spaces[13].

Teenagers from Pernambuco, Brazil, have learnt journalism skills through taking part in a project that makes a weekly radio show and videos to be shown in schools, health centres and community meeting places, as well as taking a mobile library to communities that have little for children to read. They choose the subjects themselves: AIDS, teenage pregnancy resulting from sex tourism, domestic violence, drugs and the poor standards in their schools.

Tereza Roderigues, the manager of the project, points out the benefits to the entire community, adults as well as children: "Now [the teenagers] think about their long-term future and so do adults. Everyone is starting to understand that children are important, and this is making the community a better place for kids."

As well as speaking to their communities, teenagers also need to be given a chance to speak to the politicians who are making decisions that affect their lives. On 20 November 2003, World Children's Day, Plan UK launched its 'Give us a minute' campaign, to give young people the chance to tell adults, from parents and teachers to world leaders, what their real problems are and what needs to be done to solve them. Politicians including Hilary Benn, the UK's International Development Secretary, listened to young people who had worked with Plan, such as Chernor Bah, 18, a child rights activist from Sierra Leone who had witnessed himself the atrocities committed against children during the war in his country, Nierisa, 18, from the Philippines, and Guddu, 18, from India. They told the politicians that allowing children to take part in the development of their countries was a crucial way to achieve change.


Plan

Across the world that day, children were telling adults what they thought. In India, Jagriti, 17, asked world leaders to take on the issue of poverty. In Kenya, Purity, 14, appealed to the parliament to employ more counsellors to teach teenagers about AIDS and to highlight the problem of harassment of girls[14].

Finnish teenagers have worked with Plan to raise awareness of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by designing a card game called 'Take your Rights', based on a pack of cards. Each card contains one of the articles of the Convention with an example illustrating it. As the game is played there are 'tasks' to be undertaken such as defusing a mine or searching for clean water. The aim is to encourage children to think about the issues faced by their peers in the developing world. They showed it to the President of Finland, Tarja Halonen, and discussed their concerns about children's rights with her, such as child labour, the living conditions of children in institutions, and the problems faced by girls around the world[15].

Youth Forums, at national and regional levels, are another way to get children's voices heard politically. Eighty children and adolescents from Ecuador, Colombia and Peru took part in the Social Forum Americas in July 2004. They wrote a manifesto with their concerns and proposals for a better America. They said that they wanted education that focuses on values and affection; respect for diversity; and for children's and adolescents' organisations to get involved in changing the world and to help children become aware of their rights and responsibilities.

They wanted "to be recognised, not invisible. We want that when adults walk on the streets or make decisions, they see everyone, the ones that participate in this forum and the ones that do not, because everyone is important". However, they also expressed their fears that talk would not be enough: "that people listen to us today, but nothing will happen tomorrow."[16]

Plan Norway set up a Children's Advisory Board in 2001. With 12 members, between the ages of 13 and 17, the board advises Plan on raising awareness of development issues and children's rights in Norway.

In 2003, Plan Australia initiated a youth conference called Children as Partners, which brought together children and young people, academics, business leaders, service providers, decision makers and many more from all over the world to share their experiences and learn from one another. Sixteen year-old Phuong from Vietnam commented: "Tune into kids and you'll see who we are, what we can do. Let's have a chance to speak out for ourselves because we are the only ones who can make a better world.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 13

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

2. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

(a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or

(b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.

Article 14

1. States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

2. States Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

Conclusions

Plan seeks to assist teenagers by supporting them, their families, and their communities in a variety of interconnected ways: by promoting social inclusion: creating an environment where each young person is treated as an individual with respect and dignity; helping young people to achieve their full potential in all facets of their life; assisting them to learn to understand and tolerate other people's points of view and respect their lifestyles and feelings; giving them opportunities to learn new skills and discover new experiences[1].

There is a need to look at the individual who may experiment, stretch boundaries and generally try to discover their own identity as major physical and emotional changes take place, but Plan recognises that situations and interventions are complex. What works for one fifteen year old one day may not work the next day or week, or will not work at all for another fifteen old.

In the developed world, the present generation of teenagers will turn into the most obese and infertile adults in the history of mankind, doctors warn. The drinking, eating, sexual, drug-taking and smoking habits of adolescents are creating a public health time-bomb[2].

There is a need for far more targeted education on sex, drugs, alcohol, diet and exercise in schools and in the community through awareness campaigns and parental guidance. Governments need to understand the special needs of teenagers, a group that is 'missed out', being neither children nor adults; we need to ensure that young people do not fall in the gap between services for children and those designed for adults.

While the basic problems of adolescents have not changed through history, today it is more urgent and more essential then ever before to understand and help teenagers: by looking ahead to the crises before it descends upon them and trying to protect them from the damaging influences of their environment. The case studies which are laid out in this publication are more to do without those contexts which mentally harm, physically damage, and even kill, teenagers around the world today[3]. The case studies amply illustrate the paradox that as teenagers explore the world around them, that world demands, sometimes unexpected and cruelly, of them.

Growing up in poverty means that young people often will be struggling to survive, rather than being able to develop their abilities and enjoy their youth[4]. The hopes of teenagers - and hopes are something which they have in abundance - are being dashed against the rocks of bitter realities of experience.

The world's teenagers face futures of remarkable diversity, from the challenges of disease, exploitation and illiteracy in developing countries to the challenges of unemployment, social exclusion and health risk behaviours in developed countries. The challenges are daunting, the future uncertain. Only by reading about the experiences of teenagers can they themselves and the adults of the world charts paths to brighter futures than currently face today's young people[5].

Let the Convention on the Rights of the Child be both a shield and a weapon which teenagers can use to fight for their rightful place in society.

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Executive summary

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