OUR VISION: A CALL TO ACTION
BY GIRLS IN CRISIS

In partnership with
Millions of girls around the world are living through conflict, disaster and displacement. Girls are among the worst affected in any crisis, facing double discrimination by being both young and female.

Their voices are often the least heard. This urgently needs to change.

That’s why earlier this year, young people from countries affected by crises came together in partnership with Plan International UK to create ‘Our Vision: A Call to Action by Girls in Crisis’ – their eight demands for a better future:

1. We want gender equality
2. We want better support and services for unaccompanied minors
3. We want access to a safe and quality education
4. We want to be safe from gender-based violence
5. We want good health and wellbeing
6. We want control of our bodies
7. We want fair and decent work
8. We want to be involved in creating peaceful and sustainable futures

Girls want action. They want the international community to come together to hear their demands and work with them to ensure that their rights become a reality.

This is their call to action.
HOW WAS ‘OUR VISION: A CALL TO ACTION BY GIRLS IN CRISIS’ DEVELOPED?

Plan International UK undertook consultations with young people to discuss the change they want to see.

Plan International UK partnered with over 150 young people aged 15-25 living through crises in three countries – Congolese refugees in Rwanda, South Sudanese refugees in Northern Uganda and girls living in conflict-affected North East Nigeria. These contexts each represent different experiences of what it is like to be a girl living through conflict, disaster or displacement.

The youth-led participatory methodology included focus-groups and key informant interviews to understand what impacts young girls’ lives and the barriers they face. And at every step these consultations were delivered by youth researchers.

‘Our Vision’ reflects the issues, challenges and changes young people raised during these consultations. It is their vision for a better future.

WILL YOU JOIN WITH GIRLS? WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A PARTNER

Endorsing the Call to Action means standing with girls to show support for accelerating progress to meet their specific and unique needs in times of crisis.

Governments, donors, international organisations, civil society and girls themselves know the solutions to these challenges. But to make girls’ rights a reality will take collective action.

This Call to Action will facilitate dialogue between a diverse set of partners, who can share their experience and best practice and strengthen collaboration to deliver lasting change for some of the world’s most marginalised girls.

Through voluntary commitments, partners are invited to share their plans to advance the rights and needs of girls and work in partnership to scale up their ambitions with other members and girls themselves.
1. ‘WE WANT GENDER EQUALITY’

“Girls are not safe. You find most of them at their house. So it’s very hard to form friendships. I feel bad because I am almost close to 22 years and I can’t do anything for myself.”

Dianah, 21, refugee in Uganda

Conflict and humanitarian crises often exacerbate gender inequality and discrimination. This can manifest in greater control and restrictions being placed on girls and increased domestic and care burdens.

**Control and restriction:** Girls said that conflict and disaster had led to a much greater control and restriction of girls’ movements in comparison to the boys and young men in their communities.

Girls who had been displaced described how the breakdown of social support structures and networks were often seen by families and guardians as a threat to their safety. As a result, girls reported frequently missing out on the chance to gain further education, livelihood opportunities and develop friendships.

**Time poverty and unpaid care work:** Girls spoke about the extra burden of unpaid care work which was not expected of their male peers. This included looking after family members and doing housework, and the impact that this had on their availability to pursue their education and other opportunities.

While this is often the case in non-crisis situations, girls said that they felt the situation had worsened as a result of the crisis. Many said they now had additional responsibilities, particularly looking after extended families or foster children.
Girls described how displacement and crisis leads to particularly acute challenges and risks for unaccompanied and separated girls who lack the immediate protection provided by parents, families and/or primary caregivers.

**Protection of unaccompanied minors:** Many girls that have been forcibly displaced described living without family members, as unaccompanied or separated minors. They are frequently the sole carers for younger siblings.

Being unaccompanied or separated makes them particularly vulnerable within their communities, especially to the risks of transactional sex and other forms of gender-based violence.

Girls reflected that they are often forced into marriage as the only route to have any financial support. Child marriage often brings an end to their education and limits opportunities.

**Family reunification services:** Restrictions on girls’ movements means they are often less aware of services offered that assist them with being reunited with family members. They also said that they struggle to keep up communication with family members who are living elsewhere as they often do not have access to mobile phones or credit for the phones.

“It’s very hard in the camp. Since we came, we didn’t know if we have relatives in other camps. Getting basic needs is very hard. There are no adults to support us.”

*Elizabeth, 20, South Sudanese refugee in Uganda*
3. ‘WE WANT ACCESS TO A SAFE AND QUALITY EDUCATION’

“I want to go to school. At the time, marriage was the only way, but now I’ve realised that going back to school is the best way. Because when you study, you can help yourself.”

Jackline, 19, South Sudanese refugee in Uganda

Education is a basic human right. But conflict and disasters have a devastating impact on girls’ ability to go to school.

Access and quality: The lack of provision of basic school services, particularly secondary, disproportionally affects girls. They mentioned that when they do have access to school, the education is sporadic, low in quality and learning is limited.

Girls said they face high levels of anxiety about accessing education. Even if education is provided in the community, they face significant gaps in their ability to access it due to their inability to access adequate funding.

This doesn’t stop at secondary school. Girls’ spoke about how their refugee status limits their ability to access loans to fund tertiary education.
4. ‘WE WANT TO BE SAFE FROM GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE’

“The money we get as refugees isn’t sufficient for our needs. Especially when it comes to the girls, you have items you need, like sanitary pads. And so because of that for the girls, when they are lacking basic material, they are exposed to sexual exploitation.”

Mukawera, 23, Congolese refugee in Rwanda

Conflict, crisis and displacement leaves girls at a heightened risk of gender-based violence.

**Sexual exploitation:** The risk of human trafficking and sexual exploitation was highlighted as a major concern among girls. Poverty and a lack of access to livelihood opportunities left girls at acute risk of being forced into sexual exploitation and transactional sex to cover the cost of basic services including school fees and health supplies such as period products.

**Safety and security:** Girls living in fragile or conflict-affected areas face the risk of violence daily. The journey to school or when collecting firewood at night were referenced as particularly vulnerable times. Some girls advised that in camps where girls are living as unaccompanied minors, they were particularly targeted. This increased risk of violence often results in further control and restriction of their movements.

**Sexual harassment:** Girls explained that they experience sexual harassment daily. However, they felt it is frequently not seen as problematic by communities as it doesn’t involve physical violence. Despite this, girls advised that it contributes to their sense of overwhelming anxiety and feeling unsafe.
5. ‘WE WANT GOOD HEALTH AND WELLBEING’

“Girls need psychosocial support while they are facing challenges. Girls face that life and they need a way to come out of their struggle. Sometimes they need psychosocial support to cope with that situation.”

*Elisabeth, 23, Congolese refugee in Rwanda*

Humanitarian crises can severely limit the availability of adolescent-friendly healthcare or support services for survivors of violence, abuse and exploitation. This results in poor health outcomes and increased maternal and new-born deaths.

**Access to good quality health services:** Girls said they often do not seek formal health services because of the lack of access or fear of judgement and mistreatment from providers. Instead they will often rely on dangerous informal healthcare or self-diagnosis. This was particularly true around their sexual and reproductive health.

**Psychosocial support:** Girls who have been through conflict, or survived trafficking and sexual slavery, described the trauma they faced. The girls spoke about the effects including that they still feel fear, have nightmares, and become withdrawn from their communities.

Girls explained that the problem is not just with how healthcare professionals understand mental health issues, where these services are available, but also the under-prioritisation or stigma associated with mental health within the community.
6. ‘WE WANT CONTROL OF OUR BODIES’

“I go through a lot of pain when I have my period. I may have that pain before they start and maybe for around two days, three days and it is a bit terrible. I can’t buy pads here, you can use this cloth, it is just a piece of cloth.”

Nuela, 19, South Sudanese refugee in Uganda

Girls are often not given a voice in decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and are frequently denied access to good quality services and information.

**Lack of information and service:** Girls advised that SRHR services were harder to access, particularly for girls who are unaccompanied or living with foster families. Girls spoke about feeling ill-equipped to protect themselves from the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

This lack of information and services was even more pronounced on the issue of safe abortions and girls spoke of the devastating effects illegal providers had on their lives.

**Teenage pregnancy:** Girls said that increased levels of sexual violence along with a lack of SRHR services was contributing to high levels of teenage pregnancy in their communities where a low level of reporting of sexual violence continues. Girls explained that they are often fearful to report the violence for fear of stigmatisation and fear the perpetrator will remove any financial support, leaving them alone to bring up a child with no assistance.

**Menstrual hygiene management:** This was a challenge for all the girls we spoke to. They explained that an inability to access information and supplies was resulting in sexual exploitation in order to access period products and basic pain relief. Those able to access school spoke of the amount of time they were missing due to menstruation.

Whilst some girls were able to access supplies via international organisations, these were often very poor quality or would run out before the end of their period.

Many girls said that their periods had been easier to manage before they had been displaced as their families gave them more information and provided them with pads.
7. ‘WE WANT FAIR AND DECENT WORK’

“Girls are exploited because of the lack of jobs. Poverty and exploitation are linked. Most of the time many female girls are not having their needs met in poverty – they are not having whatever they need so when someone comes to her and says we can have sex and I will resolve this problem for you – many of the girls say yes, because there is no other way.”

Sandrine, 27, Congolese refugee in Rwanda

Young women lack access to safe, fair and decent work. This limits their options and increases the risk of them being trafficked and forced into exploitative situations.

Inequality in accessing work and vocational training: Time poverty due to chores, control and restrictions on movements and other discriminatory social norms mean that girls felt they are frequently unable to access fair and decent work or engage in vocational training opportunities.

Sexual exploitation in the informal economy: Girls and young women responded that their status as refugees means they face discrimination in accessing decent work and as a result the only option available for girls that have been affected by crisis is to take roles in the informal economy, which often leads to sexual exploitation. This was particularly evident when speaking about roles in restaurants, hotels and bars.

Human trafficking: Girls expressed that conflict and displacement, and the subsequent lack of availability of employment opportunities, makes them more susceptible to human trafficking. Girls described being forced into domestic servitude or commercial sexual exploitation – feminised, highly unregulated and often invisible labour sectors. They experienced multiple forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation.
Girls know what needs to change. They are the experts in their own lives. They want to be involved in creating peaceful and sustainable futures.

Missing opportunities: All girls spoke of a hope to live safe and peaceful futures free of insecurity and violence. Girls felt strongly that they had valuable knowledge that could be offered to their communities to create this and that their voices should be heard.

However, due to the heightened level of control and restriction of movement they were missing out on opportunities to play such a role. They also reflected that because many community leadership opportunities were unpaid, they were unable to become involved due to time poverty.

Ultimately, they felt that their views were not valued as much as others in their communities and felt a frustration at not being heard despite having a lot to offer.

“WE WANT TO BE INVOLVED IN CREATING PEACEFUL AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURES’

“I am 22 and I have no occupation. I want a sustainable solution for my life. It is important for governments to listen to the voice of girls.”

Umalisa, 22, Congolese refugee in Rwanda