



# Réactions

**Violence against girls:  
their experience and protection  
in West Africa**

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# CONTEXTUALIZING THE RESEARCH

Violence against girls is a prevalent practice throughout West Africa; furthermore research shows that girls are an oppressed group at the bottom of the social ladder. Plan International-West African Regional Office is currently conducting action-research that seeks to understand the daily experience of youth and children so that future interventions will be based on their actual experience. This project, entitled “Listening to the Experiences of Children and Young People: Agents of our Contemporary World,” is carried out in collaboration with five research centers in Benin, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Niger and Senegal. Twelve African researchers will produce ten ethnographies after five to six months of fieldwork in villages and urban neighborhoods in the Region.

Solid research rests on the active involvement of children and youth. However, since the project's restitution, validation and interventions with the involved youth and youth groups remain undecided, this paper risks presenting premature conclusions. Nevertheless, the benefit of sharing this process and preliminary results justifies this deviation from the methodology and political stance it strives to materialize.

The research has shown that violence experienced by girls is very different from that experienced by boys. Although the research considered both, this specific paper focuses on the girls.

## VIOLENCE AS EXPERIENCED BY GIRLS

The available information expressed by girls from the different research sites shows that girls mainly endure violence during interactions with male adults and male youth. The children and youth highlight two key sociological traits. Firstly, these are societies whose order is ideologically egalitarian, ideally structured by gender and seniority. This legitimizes symbolic and actual violence and greatly rests on the exchange of women. Although various historical facts challenge this order, additional resources required for any significant social change are unavailable. Hence, the second sociological trait is the lack of available social and economic resources to support the society's transition from maintaining cohesiveness to fostering individual rights. Therefore, the importance and development of endurance as a way to handle powerlessness and suffering is largely understandable, and sheds light on the dysfunctions, violence and dynamics experienced.

### VIOLENCE FROM ADULTS AND PEERS

Children and youth and other subordinates in these societies, regularly endure beatings. Girls' status at the bottom of the social structure exposes them to much more beating. In fact, physical punishment is seen as a widespread way to obtain obedience and conformity to social norms as defended by hegemonic adult males, or to punish “offenders.” All interactions with adults, fathers, mothers, teachers, husbands, boyfriends, mothers-in-law, etc. commonly rely on physical punishment. Excessive physical punishment is legitimized as a fundamental educational method.

From the age of twelve or thirteen years, at the onset of puberty, girls are crucial for the reproduction of society as ordered by the two essentialized characteristics of age and gender. Moreover, men's access to girls' bodies is both a source of pleasure and prestige, enhancing their superior social position. Men abusively consider this access as a reward. In Senegal, researchers observed that in tourist areas families commonly encourage young girls to sustain occasional transactional sexual relationships with "toubabs" (white people) or urban Senegalese to complement the families' revenues. Serious concerns arise when parents, and more generally adults, are ready to engage young girls in such damaging relationships to complement their income or satisfy their lust, even though declared local norms unanimously condemn these types of practices.

Constant physical sexually-oriented aggressions are extremely common from male peers and adults. This is confirmed by various experiences namely in the formal education system, where sexual exploitation of girls for personal pleasure or larger benefits are seen as compensation. (A popular Ghanaian saying talks of sexual relations with pupils as "bush allowance.") Girls are the object of less abuse when teachers are regularly paid and controlled by the community as in Niger's community schools. The girls' resistance in this situation pushes them to develop strategic exposure, exploiting their bodies and men's sex drives rather than using their bodies to change what are perceived as men's "natural" drives. In turn, the girls' response is naturalized (as in the "whoring" behavior of young girls) by the hegemonic adults, justifying their violent behavior. We are therefore facing a spiral of violence, in which girls are socially very weak.

As in all settings where hegemonic masculinity reigns, women and, a fortiori, girls are physically constrained to specific spaces under adult control where social order is the strongest, i.e. the domestic space. Therefore, markets, school, the bush and video clubs are seen as threatening to social order. The girls' husbands, mothers-in-law or mothers are in charge of policing girls' movements. In fact, mothers in the patriarchal and largely polygamist societies in the research sites are held responsible for girls' conformity. Mothers hold intermediate positions, balanced between their daughters' promotion and their responsibility to ensure their conformity. They oscillate between supporting and reprimanding their daughters in the face of regular feuds with husband and co-wives.

In all the research sites, girls interpret the increase of divorce and conjugal violence as the source and proof of their weak position and as a constant threat that structures their experience, expectations and tactics. The weakening of their mothers' status also exposes them to dangers. They then respond to the dire need to assure their mothers' survival, limiting their own efforts to promote themselves.

Girls understand forced marriage as stemming from the above-described phenomena. On the one hand, the marrying of young girls by elders is a commonly used strategy to maintain social order(delegating the responsibility to control girls to the in-laws and husband) and securing the social status of the elders' families as they understand it. Marrying off daughters is also a way to control girls' individuality and to gain personal, economic and prestigious benefits. On the other hand, becoming pregnant outside of marriage often allows girls to counteract the elders' plans while contributing to their stigmatization and physical reprimand. Risky abortion practices are understandably very common in this context. In Guinea where forced marriage has disappeared, the lowering of the marriage age remains a reality. This fact needs further investigation,

In some situations, the increasing practice of food deprivation is used to pressure girls as another constraint mechanism (substituting physical punishment condemned by rights-oriented communicators). This generates logical mistrust of the established order. The situation motivates girls to develop their own active behaviors and to implement resistance strategies using their only personal resource, their bodies, which are considered available for sex, reproduction and labor. Insofar as work is considered as an essential education vector, some tolerance exists towards the

very active economic initiatives girls develop allowing them to split earned income with their families, usually between their mothers and themselves. They use their money for clothing and the quest for beauty (connecting them to the wider world), informal saving schemes, school fees and supplies, apprenticeships or literacy training, but mainly to secure means for survival (informal mutual health systems, food purchases).

Fear is actually perceived as a very violent and powerful instrument to constrain children and youth and more specifically, girls. Fear is generated through direct physical violence, spiritual forces, witchcraft activities and isolation from one's peers. Witchcraft belongs to the adult world, exclusively controlled by powerful adults. In their theatrical expressions, children and youth desperately call on the leading elders to defend and protect them from such harm. It should be underscored that children and youth dread any curse and will always seek their parents' blessings. Children and youth point to witchcraft's close connection to jealousy, or in other words, egalitarianism. Egalitarianism, hegemonic leadership and the capacity to endure both psychological and physical suffering shape norms and aspirations in the research sites.

Children are usually believed to enter their own gender roles around age seven when an active phase of their life begins and they learn their role by participating in productive activities. Girls definitely become central producers and reproducers around age twelve to thirteen. The poorest, low-caste girls from weak, broken families suffer the most violence. From age seven to thirteen, school-aged girls are most frequently subjected to other youth's violence, mainly from their male peers. In fact, by that time, boys have integrated the privileged position guaranteed by gender and age. Their actions seem to rehearse their future hegemonic position. The violence commonly entails insults, physical or sexual harassment and in some cases, rape. Girls are exposed to violent pressures that aim to confine them to domestic spaces, activities and roles. Courtship is determined by youth kinship relationships and in certain contexts, membership in different castes. Girls question boys' motivations for courtship and try to escape the uncertainties involved in dating. They wonder if they represent objects of pleasure, prestige or alliance to the boys. Furthermore, girls experience themselves as endangering the social order. They are held responsible for disturbances and violence that are triggered when boys treat girls as objects another mechanism used to impose social order on girls.

# SOCIETAL FACTS

Any efforts meant to support girls against violence should originate from the existing notions, norms, survival strategies and innovative endeavors within the specific context where the action occurs. For example, raising awareness about child exploitation in villages where child labor is essential but not exploitative is clearly more damaging in its stigmatization of one's society and therefore one's identity than supportive. This section explains the common norms and survival strategies relevant to the issue of girls' well-being.

Local norms are shaped by actual living conditions and long-established survival mechanisms. As detailed above, work is central to education; girls and boys are expected to learn their future roles by accompanying their mothers, sisters and aunts or fathers, brothers and uncles in their daily work. Learning through doing is a constant, usually starting at age seven. At fourteen, youth enter adulthood and are expected to employ the learned skills needed to assume their adult roles. Initiation rites previously epitomize this knowledge sharing function. Recently parents increasingly delegate their educative responsibilities to other actors, religious leaders, siblings, and husbands.

Given the obtained results, it is tempting to qualify the present situation as a transition, a crisis or at worst, as dysfunctional. Longstanding practices such as excision lose their educational relevance when they are severed from their *raison d'être*, but violence remains a crucial way to obtain conformity from children.

Girls in the research sites have few options to secure their survival: agriculture in rural settings, apprenticeship usually implying departure from their communities, marriage or trading access to their bodies for resources or school. School as it exists nowadays offers few opportunities and frequently trains young people for obsolete functions. Furthermore, girls' parents rightly see schools as dangerous spaces that consume useful workforce and social resources. However, school is still considered an institution that provides children and youth with instruments to enable their connection to an increasingly influential world; researchers observed its obvious intensified daily presence during their fieldwork situations.

These options fall short in satisfying girls' universally shared aspirations for respect, self realization and escape from violence imposed by society or rather, by the incapacity of today's world to satisfy those aspirations. In oppressed societies, the weakest social groups endure more suffering; this is corroborated by the majority of the girls who expressed themselves during this research. In short, the upsetting social changes have put to the fore individual responsibility and rights to the detriment of collective order and hegemonic elders. However, the majority lacks the means to concretize the aspirations triggered by this shift.

# PROTECTION, INTERVENTIONS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

## PROTECTION NOTION

Protection exclusively results from a relationship. As a notion, it is only referred to in the context of daughter/mother and girls/age-set peers, and with much less effectiveness, NGOs/girls. The State in its turn is seen by the girls as either too distant or absent. Like other hegemonic actors, upper classes are assimilated into the hegemonic role played by elders. Again, understandable tactics for survival slip to abuse and greedy profiteering at an inter-actional level.

NGOs consider protection as keeping girls safe and violence-free. However, girls are concerned about their capacity to develop their economic—but also social and emotional—autonomy and survival capacity. All too often NGO “protection” fails to offer comprehensive support. At best, girls cope by choosing to conform, and at worst, their suffering ends in suicide.

## INTERVENTIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Thus far, the study and interactions with the children and youth have identified the following intervention priorities to enhance girls’ promotion efforts. The results obtained so far demonstrate that awareness-raising, though necessary, has never proved sufficient to secure positive changes since power rest at the core of oppression.

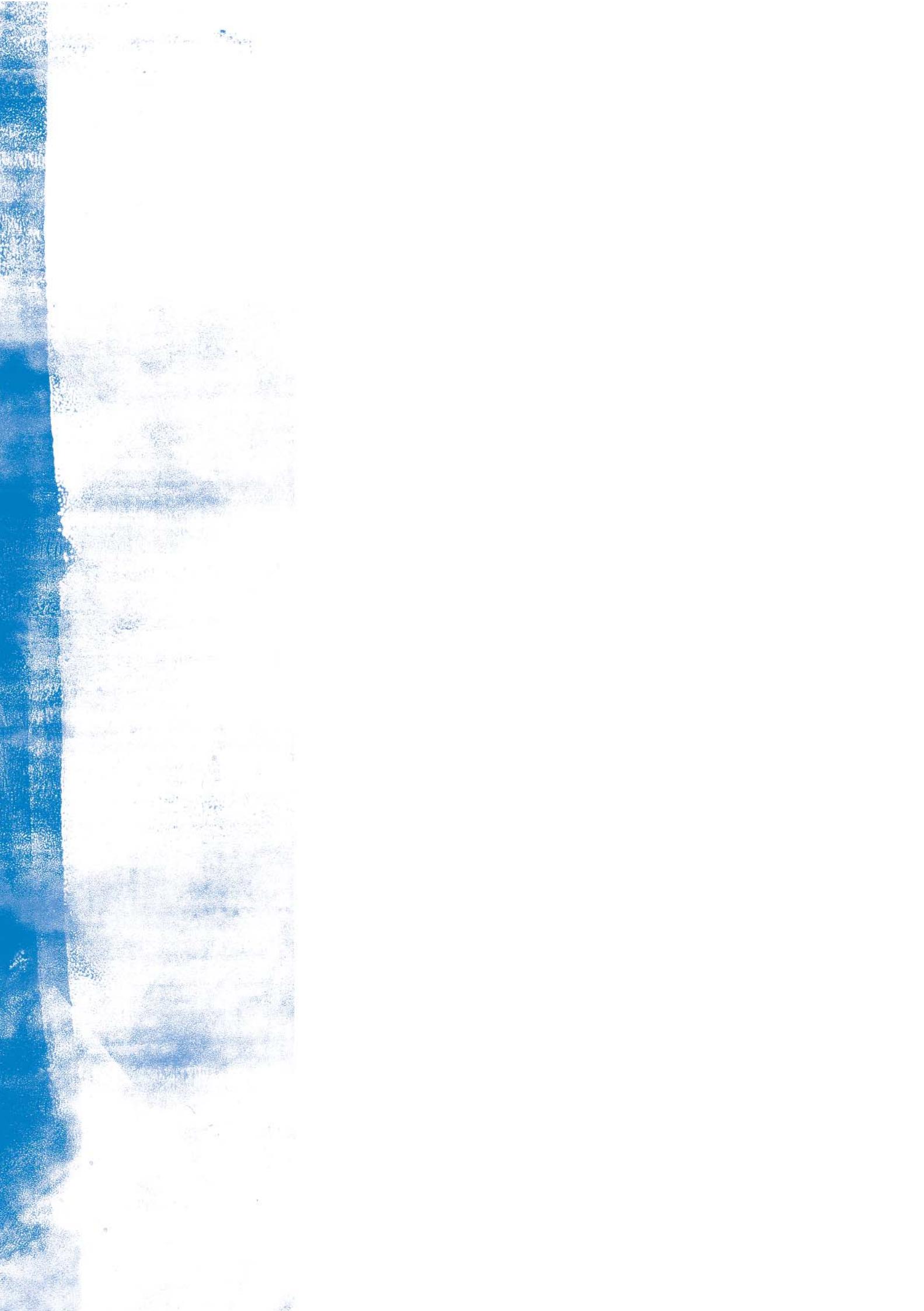
- Limited capacity to access economic resources is a central factor in all research areas .
- Both girls and boys develop economic initiatives to generate incomes; those efforts should be supported.
- Safe and supportive groups for girls are age-set group that form naturally. Coaching and support for these groups—both in terms of actual actions in the social and economic realm and activities to promote learning and reflection—should be supported.
- Since they no longer function as knowledge-sharing rites, initiations should be substituted and updated through intra- and inter-age group exchanges (namely on the topic of sexual health), dialogues and information. It is crucial to encourage supportive exchanges between mothers and daughters as well as inter-generational and inter-gender dialogue centered on analyzing the current predicament and deciding on actions.
- Enhancing girls’ position requires support for individual and group expression and communication about their actual situations and aspirations. Cultural initiatives taken up by girls enable them to express themselves individually and collectively to a wider audience. For example, sometimes, both aims are pursued through dancing.

Relevant social spheres and allies for girls are extremely limited. No services seem readily available beyond their local social networks to help with their initiatives, support their claims or ease their suffering. Unfortunately, this is a clear negative evaluation of the justice systems and social services, whether delivered by the States or the civil society systems. What new social alliances have emerged to support the oppressed in these disturbing times?

## THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIAL CHANGE

As a final note, humans are by nature conservative and reluctant to social change. For once and for all, the complexity of social change should be recognized; social change is not a linear process. The 19th century metaphor of the mechanical model of change in which actions have effects resulting in a desired new situation should be relinquished. This is difficult to affirm when institutions engaged in social change (NGOs, States), led by their own accountability and management models, are compelled to embrace practices dictated by this naïve illusion.

Likewise, it is illusionary to believe that social change will only come about through enhancing reflection and knowledge of the oppressed's own predicament. Power is about constraints and the capacity to gather resources and impose one's will. It is about building young girls' social capital.



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