



**STOP
THE WAR
ON CHILDREN**



Save the Children

**EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY**

**PROTECTING CHILDREN
IN 21ST CENTURY CONFLICT**

LISTEN TO OUR VOICES

Before conflict, we had peace.
Before conflict, we could be children.
School was a place of learning
and development, and where our voices
were heard.

The streets were full of joy and happiness,
where we walked and played.
We remember a life without conflict.
And we know a childhood in peace is possible.

But today we are paying the price
for adults' war.

We are scared.
Our playground has been transformed
into a dangerous place.
We hide under our kitchen table.
We hear gunshots, bombs and explosions.
We are forced to quit school
and leave our home.
Many of us have lost our parents,
brothers, sisters and neighbours.
We are forced to work, beg or even kill
to survive.
We marry as children and give birth
to children.
We have been tortured, kidnapped,
raped and silenced.
We feel anger, resentment, and sadness.
We go to bed hungry.
Some of us never wake up.

Our present and future have been put on hold.

Do not silence our words and our dreams.
Listen to what we have to say.
Listen to our opinions.

We want the war to stop
– we don't want to hear a single shot.
Let's make the past the bridge to our future.
We have big dreams for ourselves
and our countries.
We imagine our countries in peace,
where we are put at the heart of all decisions
– because we are our countries' present and
future.
Even during war, we dream of a country
where all children can walk safely in their
neighborhood,
and go to a school free from violence.

A place with cinemas and parks
– and electricity, so we can watch TV.
All this should be not only in our dreams,
but in reality.
All this is our right.

As leaders, you have this duty to fulfil.
We call on the world's leaders to ensure
we are able to go to school, play
and feel protected... in every circumstance.

We ask leaders to change
weapons for books,
bullets for pencils,
confrontations for games,
cries for smiles,
and hatred for love.

We ask leaders to put a smile
on every child's face.
We ask leaders to turn to peace,
to pledge to protect us
and promise us development.

We ask leaders to offer us the opportunities
that will enable us to become
the best versions of ourselves.

Our common future is at risk.
We demand that you act now.

*This message was composed by
children from Mali, Sudan, Colombia, Yemen
and Syria during consultations carried out
by Save the Children in January 2019.*

**Do not silence
our words and
our dreams.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'Every war is a war against children.'

One hundred years on, those words of Save the Children founder Eglantyne Jebb resonate as strongly as ever. Right now, across the world, millions of children are caught up in conflicts they played no part in creating. Often their rights are violated with total impunity.

New evidence presented by Save the Children is damning:

- 420 million children – nearly one-fifth of children worldwide – are living in a conflict zone; a rise of nearly 30 million children from 2016.
- The number of children living in conflict zones has doubled since the end of the cold war.
- 142 million children are living in high-intensity conflict-zones; that is, in conflict zones with more than 1,000 battle-related deaths in a year.
- New analysis from Save the Children shows that the numbers of 'grave violations' of children's rights in conflict reported and verified by the United Nations have almost tripled since 2010.
- Hundreds of thousands of children are dying every year as a result of indirect effects of conflict – including malnutrition, disease and the breakdown of healthcare, water and sanitation.

The protection of children in conflict – and with it the realisation of the promises made in the declarations, conventions and statutes of the 20th century – is one of the defining challenges of the 21st century.

The nature of conflict – and its impact on children – is evolving. Intra-state conflict is increasing, as are the numbers of armed actors involved. The world is witnessing deliberate campaigns of violence against civilians, including the targeting of schools, the abduction and enslavement of girls, and deliberate starvation.

Armed conflicts are more protracted; for instance, the most prominent conflict in recent times – the war in Syria – has lasted longer than the second world war. The longer a conflict lasts the greater the indirect harm caused as essential services cease to function. And in many protracted situations the lines between 'conflict' and 'peace' have become blurred.

Conflict is also increasingly urban; in Mosul and Mogadishu, for example, children, their homes and their schools are on the front line, vulnerable to indiscriminate attack. In today's

armed conflicts, there is often no longer a clearly demarcated battlefield: children's homes and schools are the battlefield.

Children on the frontline

Increasingly, the brunt of armed violence and warfare is being borne by children. Children suffer in conflict in different ways to adults, partly because they are physically weaker and also because they have so much at stake – their physical, mental and psychosocial development are heavily dependent on the conditions they experience as children.

Conflict affects children differently depending on a number of personal characteristics – significantly gender and age, but also disability status, ethnicity, religion and whether they live in rural or urban locations. The harm that is done to children in armed conflict is not only often more severe than that done to adults, it has longer lasting implications – for children themselves and for their societies. Children suffer in conflict in three broad ways:

They may be deliberately targeted.

The commission of atrocities against children is an exceptionally powerful way of terrorising a population – and, hence, a preferred military tactic for armed forces and groups in many of today's conflicts. Children are also often targeted because they may be easily manipulated and exploited, for instance, as soldiers or suicide bombers. Schools become targets for tactical reasons – for example, as a recruiting ground or because they are being used for military purposes.

Children suffer as a result of indiscriminate or disproportionate military action.

For example, they may be killed or injured by landmines or the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effect in populated areas.

Children suffer on a huge scale from the indirect consequences of conflict.

These include displacement; the breakdown of markets and essential public services, such as healthcare, water and sanitation; and pervasive insecurity. While indirect effects and direct violations are both part of the same continuum of harm inflicted on children by modern conflict,

420

**MILLION
CHILDREN
LIVE IN
CONFLICT
ZONES**

these indirect consequences of conflict affect and kill many more children. More still miss out on school and the chance of a better future.

A crisis of compliance

This report argues that children suffering in conflict today are not primarily suffering from a deficit of identified rights. Rather, they are suffering from a crisis of compliance with those rights. Armed actors, often including government forces, are committing violations against children. And they are often being met by, at best, international indifference and, at worst, complicity.

There are three key dimensions of the crisis facing children in conflict today.

- States and armed non-state actors are failing to uphold standards in their own conduct or to insist on this from their allies and from others over whom they have influence.
- Governments are taking too little action to hold perpetrators of violations to account for their crimes.
- Not enough is being invested in practical action on the ground to protect children in conflict and to support their recovery.

But there is cause for hope. When governments and other actors have decided that they want to uphold high standards, we have seen that rules, law and norms have been developed to constrain violence. When governments and international bodies have committed to take accountability seriously, perpetrators have been punished. And when governments and multilateral agencies have invested in practical action on the ground, children have been pro-

The ten worst conflict-affected countries to be a child

- Afghanistan
- Central African Republic
- Democratic Republic of Congo
- Iraq
- Mali
- Nigeria
- Somalia
- South Sudan
- Syria
- Yemen

tected and lives have been saved.

This report, *Stop the War on Children*, establishes the basis for an international plan of action to protect children in conflict. Leaders and governments have a particularly powerful role to play. We call on them to:

- Uphold standards of conduct in conflict.
- Hold perpetrators of violations to account.
- Take practical action to protect children and support their recovery.

(For our detailed recommendations, see full report.)

It is 100 years since Eglantyne Jebb, the founder of the idea of children's rights, began her work, and 30 years since the birth of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UN General Assembly's 74th Session in September 2019 is a timely opportunity for governments to recommit to protecting children in conflict through specific pledges of action.

For the children living in the world's conflict zones, action cannot come soon enough.

Our Charter to Stop the War on Children

Based on the principle that all children have fundamental rights, our Charter sets out ten clear and incontrovertible goals:

- All children are protected against killing and maiming.
- Schools and health centres are treated as zones of peace and protection.
- Every child is protected from rape and sexual violence.
- No child is recruited into armed forces or groups.
- All children in conflict are safe from abduction, detention and displacement.
- No child is denied access to humanitarian aid in conflict.
- Violations of the rights of children in conflict are rigorously monitored, reported and acted upon.
- Those committing, overseeing and ordering violations against children in conflict are brought to justice and held accountable for their actions.
- Every child harmed or affected by conflict receives practical help and support to cope, recover and rebuild their lives.
- All children affected by conflict, including refugees and those internally displaced, have access to a good-quality education.