

A young girl with dark skin and braided hair adorned with colorful beaded ornaments is looking directly at the camera. A large red prohibition sign (a circle with a diagonal slash) is superimposed over her face and the background, which shows a classroom setting with wooden desks and other children.

WE WANT

SAFE SCHOOLS

Experiences from children in Mali



Save the Children



**Sweden
Sverige**

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Save the Children is the world's leading independent organisation for children. Save the Children works in more than 120 countries.

We save children's lives. We fight for their rights. We help them fulfil their potential.

Our Vision

A world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development and participation.

Our Mission

To inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children and to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives. We will stay true to our values of accountability, ambition, collaboration, creativity and integrity.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply indebted to all the young researchers and child respondents in Mali for sharing their stories and experiences on attacks on education and how these have affected their lives and mental wellbeing. No words can express our heartfelt appreciations.

We extend our sincere gratitude to all conflict- and violence-affected children in Mopti, who participated in this content gathering mission. You have left a permanent impression on us through your very courageous and unreserved contributions. You spared time amidst your daily struggles to share personal experiences, opinions, and views, as well as recommendations on how attacks on education should be addressed for children to be able to resume their education safely.

Our special thanks go to the Protecting Children in Conflict team in the Regional Programming Unit in Nairobi and Dakar and Save the Children Mali staff in Bamako and Mopti for all the support you provided to ensure the children are able to share their stories meaningfully and safely.



BACKGROUND

The content gathering on children’s experiences of attacks on education and their impact on children’s mental wellbeing contributes to the objectives of the Protecting Children Affected by Armed Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa Programme 2020-2023 under Sweden’s strategy for Regional Development Cooperation for Sub-Saharan Africa 2016-2021. This strategy provides the framework of a comprehensive Save the Children programme built around 6 objectives:

- 1) Strengthened capacity for regional actors in Sub-Saharan Africa to prevent, resolve and deal with the effects of armed conflict on children.
- 2) Increased influence and participation by children, youth and CSOs in processes for peace and reconciliation in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- 3) Strengthened capacity and competence for country offices and partners to engage with armed forces and groups in order to prevent, resolve and deal with the effects of armed conflict on children in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- 4) Strengthened humanitarian capacity and capability in Francophone conflict-affected countries in West and Central Africa, in particular local and national actors, to protect children affected by armed conflict.

- 5) Strengthened role of local humanitarian child protection actors in Francophone conflict-affected countries in West and Central Africa in coordinated service delivery, through increased leadership and influence and access to humanitarian funding.
- 6) Strengthened capacity of regional actors and civil society actors in Sub-Saharan Africa to deploy transformative and sustainable policies and actions based on evidence and learning.

Child participation is one of Save the Children’s thematic areas in accordance with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), as well as Articles 4 and 7 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), which recognise that children have a right to have their views heard and considered. This implies that children have a right to be informed and involved in decisions and actions which concern them, and that their points of view are considered. The project was conceptualised with child participation as a key objective and indispensable to the effective delivery of the project.

Child-led research, on which this field study is anchored, is a participatory process that aims to engage with

children and young people to conduct pieces of research on related issues that matter to them. This methodology provides opportunities for Malian children and young people to amplify their voices and contribute their views on attacks on education. It is hoped that Malian children, supported by adults, will influence decision-making by using their findings to put pressure on stakeholders and decision-makers to prevent and address the consequences of attacks on education and promote safe schools and schooling.

The purpose of the child-led research was to obtain children's views on "Education Under Attack", and the effect this has had on children and their schooling as well as on children's psychological and mental wellbeing.

Context

Since 2012, many parts of the northern and later on the central region of Mali have become a theatre for armed conflict and violence, including massacres and destruction of property due to incidents of insecurity, intercommunal violent conflicts as well as ethnic violence. Areas that have been affected include towns and villages located in Central Mali (e.g., in Segou and Mopti) and in regions in Northern Mali — such as, in Gao, Kidal,

Timbuktu and the northern parts of Mopti. A host of factors, such as, porous borders, illicit human and drug trafficking activities and non-State armed groups (NSAGs) operating in the region have historically been blamed for much of the insecurity in the north.

Based on the Education Cluster Report (2013), elements within the armed forces and NSAGs "occupied, looted, or destroyed some 130 schools" in the north since 2012. The GCPEA 2020 report also identified military use of schools and universities in Mali from 2015 to 2019¹. Due to fighting and withdrawal of essential personnel (e.g., teachers) from schools out of fear for their lives or reprisal, many schools were forced to close². The volatile security situation in Central and Northern Mali between 2014 and 2017 continued to pose a threat to children's education and lives, school personnel and infrastructure. This was due to the presence of NSAGs operating in Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu (in the north) and Ségou and Mopti (in the centre).

Because of threat of attacks issued against teaching personnel, more than 500 schools were forced to close — affecting more than 150,000 school children who had to stay away from school for their own safety³. In Mali,

¹GCPEA, Education Under Attack 2020, A Global Study of Attacks on Schools, Universities, their Students and Staff, 2017-2019. https://9ehb82bl65d34vylp1jrl-fy5-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/eua_2020_full.pdf

²Ibid.

³Amnesty International, [Mali: Violations and abuses as instability spreads](#): A report by Amnesty International released in October 2017, ahead of Mali's Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council quoted by Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), <https://protectingeducation.org/news/mali-insecurity-keeps-more-than-150000-children-out-of-school/>, site visited on 28th June, 2021





over 60 attacks on education took place in 2019 alone — with over 1,100 schools closed⁴. By early 2020, Mali had 1,261 school closures⁵ — a 13 percent increase. At least 27 attacks on middle schools took place in June 2020, when schools reopened for children to take their exams⁶.

Attacks on education in Mali have had numerous devastating effects as described above, such as deaths and physical harm, damaged school infrastructure, school closures and school withdrawals, depriving students from accessing education, risks to children travelling to access new schools that are often further away, increased risk of child labour and child marriage and pregnancy among students, to mention but a few.

Besides, the psychosocial and mental wellbeing of a number of students, teachers and other education personnel and support staff has also been affected as a result.



⁴Education Cannot Wait, <https://www.educationcannotwait.org/attacks-on-students-teachers-and-schools-surge-in-africas-sahel-gcpea/>, site visited on 28th June, 2021

⁵HRV, Burkina Faso: Armed Islamic Attack Education, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/26/burkina-faso-armed-islamists-attack-education>, Site visited on 29th June, 2021

⁶Education Cannot Wait, <https://www.educationcannotwait.org/attacks-on-students-teachers-and-schools-surge-in-africas-sahel-gcpea/>, Site visited on 28th June, 2021



TESTIMONIALS



Name: Ali*

Age: 17 years

Location: Mopti

**Name changed for protection of identity*

He never maintained eye contact the whole time he was sharing his story. He had this look, that really spoke more than he did. A lost look, more precisely. Like his eyes had seen so much but his mind hasn't processed it and his mouth has not formed the words yet. When asked about his experiences, his eyes would say more than his words.

"It was the morning of 24th May 2019 at around 8:00a.m. when the armed groups walked into the school, the first thing they did was attack the teachers. They killed some of the teachers and some of my friends. More teachers than students were killed because we were able to jump out from the windows.

The armed groups' main mission was to convert our school into a Quranic school and that was the reason they killed the teachers blaming them for corrupting us. Once they had totally destroyed the school, they followed us to the village to take some of the children whom they would recruit for war.

My family had to move swiftly and hide me from the attackers because I was 16 and they usually like to recruit young men my age. I got into a bus and had to travel 2 days from Bankass to Mopti which is a fairly safer town. I came and settled in an IDP camp where people who had left my village came and settled."

That was three years ago.

"There are no more schools in my village, the groups attacked all of them. I have not seen my parents for three years now and it really breaks my heart. I talk to them on phone. But, it is not the same as seeing them every day. I am very lonely here although I live with my uncle."

Ibrahim has been able to go back to school and carry on with his education. There's a school within the community that has been opened to take in all the children fleeing from the groups.

"I am 18 years old but still in primary school, my determination to finish school is fueling me to complete my education.

The attacks at my former school left me traumatized. When I got to Mopti I did not talk to anyone, I did not trust anyone and it was hard for me to ask for help. I have since been able to make friends in school and make new friends here."

He pauses for a very long time, holding his gaze outside, meanwhile an Imam is calling out for Muslim prayers outside. That fills the air.

We sit in that silence for as long as he needs.

“The road from Bankass to Mopti is terrible and risky. We went off road so often, all of us aware that there was a possibility of being attacked by the groups. I did not have any identity information on me and I had to explain at every check point. I am just glad I made it here.”

With that, the lost look in his eyes became clearer. He definitely has seen a lot in his 18 years. I only hope that the fact that he made it out and is able to continue with his education just reassures him everything is going to be okay.

“ I am 18 years old but still in primary school, my determination to finish school is fueling me to complete my education.

”





Name: Aboubacar*

Young Researcher

Age: 15 years

Location: Mopti

**Name changed for protection of identity*

He carries a green afro comb, the type that is shaped in the form of a fist at the top, in his back pocket. He rocks an afro that is very neat from morning to evening. He occasionally whips out the comb mid conversation and runs it through his awesome afro, it makes sounds that look painful but from the look on his face they are not. We have to appreciate the effort to look dapper. He is also a young budding photographer, he has a Canon camera hanging from his neck. He hasn't graduated to carrying it on his shoulder but he will, given his very good skills it is a matter of time.

Aboubacar is also a parliamentarian in the Children's Parliament of Mali. At 15 he is part of a vibrant team of young children who have come together to contribute to the fight for their fellow children.

For over two decades, armed groups have continuously attacked schools and there have also been ethnic conflicts that have caused families to move and that in turn displaced a lot of school going children. Some of them are lucky enough to resume school, some are not.





“If you want to destabilize a country, attack its education system. If you want to completely destroy it, attack the children.” This was his first statement during an interview in a makeshift classroom in one of the many IDP camps within the Mopti area. All this due to conflict.

Aboubacar is here to receive training and carry out research on the effects attacks on education have had as part of a child-led research initiative by Save the Children. On top of his titles he can now add child researcher. He says he thought he knew what the children have been going through but after going through the training and carrying out field research, it is clear there is more to be done.

“Children are the future of any country, and seeing so many children staying here displaced and unable to continue with their education breaks my heart because this should not be happening to them. I really want to help

these children and I will.”

Samba says he feels guilty because according to him he has been looking at this conflict situation from a privileged position. He hopes to continue lobbying and pushing for better systems and ensure that from now on every displaced child is able to go back to school.

“After talking to the children, I realize that there is a bigger problem. On top of not going to school, they do not have food, they do not have basic necessities. It feels like our leaders do not think about children. One day I will be president and I will prioritize the children.”

He says this and goes into his back pocket to retrieve his green comb and runs it through his well kempt afro. It almost feels like a power move after letting me know I just might have interviewed Mali’s future president.

“*If you want to destabilize a country, attack its education system. If you want to completely destroy it, attack the children.* **”**



Name: Aminata*

Child Respondent

Age: 9 years old

Village: Piro, Mopti region

**Name changed for protection of identity*

When we arrive at any village for any assignment, we tend to attract a crowd. Mostly because people are curious about what we are here for. Crowds are good, you learn a lot about a place by just observing its people. Majority of our curious onlookers when we arrive at the IDP camp are children. Children are the best, how quickly they gravitate and are curious is just amazing. We arrive at this IDP camp and we are greeted by large white tents, after driving in a little there are more tents; blue ones this time. We park outside one of the blue tents. A crowd has already formed as we carry out research trying to understand the effects of attacks on education on the children in this particular IDP camp.

The research is conducted by child researchers trained by Save the Children on attacks on education in Mali, what this means to the children, and the effects the attacks have had on their mental health.

We enter one of the blue tents. It is a makeshift classroom. The class has wooden benches for the students, a table on the side which I am assuming is for the teachers, and a blackboard that is hanging loosely at the front. The seats are currently occupied by both the child researchers and the respondents. This is where one team of the child researchers is carrying out their research.

One of the respondents catches my attention, because one of the researchers is relying on her to translate to the other children since she seems to understand both local dialects. She is so young and her little body does not match her voice. Her peers also seem to respect her. I watch her as she interacts and commands the room every time she is required to. Really it is marvelous to watch.

I pull one of the researchers aside and ask them to find me when they are done. I stand outside because the tents get really hot. The high was 36- 37 degrees that day. When we eventually sit down, we get into why and how she got to live in this IDP camp.

Her name is Aminata and she is 9 years old. She originally comes from Pori village. She currently lives at this IDP camp due to the attacks on her school and village by armed groups who ultimately killed some of her family members.

Here's her story;

"One morning in December 2020, our school was attacked by armed men. The school was attacked because these armed groups don't like the school and they didn't want the school to function in the village.

During the attack on the school, the armed groups killed three people, two of those my immediate family. The people lost their lives as they tried to protect us.





Afterwards, the armed men asked the villagers to provide 20 people (adults and children) to join their group, and make a financial contribution towards the group or we would have to leave the village.

The villagers did not have 20 people to give to the armed group, our parents did not have money either. So, they opted to leave the village.

I am always very scared. And often I have the memories of that attack because my two uncles were killed in that attack.

I saw it.

I think about them all the time.”

At this point she gets very emotional and is unable to continue. Behind us the sun sets on what feels like a very dark day.

Name: Djeneba*

Child Researcher

Age: 17 years

Location: Mopti

**Name changed for protection of identity*



"I strongly believe in the power of children. My only wish is that every child in Mali can have equal rights. I didn't choose to be born into the family I was born in, but I feel like if I was any of the children we met today, I would hope against all odds that someone somewhere is fighting for me and my rights to a better future."

Djeneba is the President of the Children's Parliament in the Mopti region of Mali. She has no political aspirations though. The expectation would be that because she is the current President, she would be an aspiring politician in the near future but she believes she can effect change without necessarily being a politician. Which is true.

Her and her team of Parliamentarians are here on a child-led research training by Save the Children. A training that will see them acquire tools to engage their peers on the attacks they faced while in school, and the effects of the attacks on their mental health and emotional wellbeing.

"I have never gone to a school that has been attacked. I have heard about it, but never even spoken to any child who has been to a school that has been attacked. This is my first time, talking and interacting first hand with children who have gone through this and it is just heart breaking."

She is not shy but she is also not very outspoken. A fast learner, she picked up on the tools in the training and you could see her trying to help her peers especially those that couldn't grasp the concepts in the training. She has a good grasp of the English language with French being her first language.

The training has completely opened her up to more possibilities of what she can do and most importantly how.

"After talking to those children and hearing some of the horrors they have had to experience, I want to lobby to the highest office for their rights. I realize now more than ever how powerful my current position is and it is my super power."

She plans to lobby for the children to access schools and better facilities even in the IDP camps. From the training her passion has grown in leaps and bounds.

We have no choice but to wish you the best Madam President.





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