

**THE ROLE AND EXPERIENCE OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS
IN PEACE AND SECURITY**

ISSUE PAPER

PLAN International Australia



The Australian Civil Society Coalition for WPS

The Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security is a non-partisan and independent coalition of civil society organisations, networks and individuals working to advance the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in Australia, Asia and the Pacific region and globally.

Our vision is a world in which gender equality, and the contributions and rights of diverse women and girls, are at the forefront of transforming conflict to build peace.

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Issue Papers

The Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women Peace and Security commissioned the writing of thematically focused Issue Papers to inform the development of Australia's second National Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2nd NAP) and to advance the discussion on women, peace and security in Australia. These Issue Papers build on key themes outlined in "[Listening to Women's Voice and Making the Connections to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Fifth Report of the Annual Civil Society Dialogue on Women, Peace and Security.](#)"

Issue Paper Contributors

The Australian WPS Coalition thanks Hayley Cull, Head of Advocacy and Pasanna Mutha-Merrenge, Manager, Policy and Government Relations from PLAN International Australia for their contribution.

The role and experience of adolescent girls in peace and security

There are close to 600 million adolescent girls aged 10 to 19 living in the world today, with 500 million in developing countries. Importantly, more than half the global population of adolescent girls are on Australia's doorstep, growing up in the countries that we provide aid and development to, trade with and engage with on foreign policy.

Our neighbours in South Asia host a staggering 340 million adolescent girls and boys, and East Asia and the Pacific are home to 277 million adolescents. In the Sub-Saharan region, where we provide the most in humanitarian aid, 10 to 19 year olds make up almost one quarter of the region's population.

This means that half a billion adolescent girls in the developing world are our next generation of leaders, workers and mothers. Empowering girls teaches them to use their voices; to speak for themselves, and to recognise that they have choices. This leads to transforming economies and building peace.

It is important to recognise that adolescent girls' experience of the peace and security agenda is different to that of younger children, boys, men and even adult women. The unique intersection of age and gender makes adolescent girls particularly vulnerable to physical, emotional, sexual, and mental health issues and disproportionately high levels of sexual and gender-based violence.

The picture is even bleaker for girls that are the most disadvantaged and discriminated against, such as girls that have a disability, those who are the poorest or live in the most remote communities, girls that are sex workers, girls that belong to a minority indigenous, ethnic or religious group, those who are young mothers, girls who are refugees or migrants or girls who identify as lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

And yet, despite the challenges they face, adolescent girls can be powerful agents of social change. They have the desire and the capacity to transform the world and are looking for opportunities to do so. In fact, young people have played an important role in every social movement in modern history.

Research into adolescent girls in emergencies and protracted crises suggests that humanitarian responses do not account for the unique risks they face, and how their routines, roles and assets shape their ability to safely access vital resources. Adolescent girls can be rendered invisible, forced to take on roles and responsibilities that restrict their mobility and visibility.

However, if girls are listened to and their needs are met, they can go on to play a critical role before, during and after emergencies. Girls that are able to access education during times of crisis are less likely to be at risk of child marriage, trafficking and gender based violence. Adolescent girls also play a crucial role in supporting their families and their communities to prepare for disasters, understand risks and apply transformative solutions.

As Australia works to develop its next National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, it is vital that we make adolescent girls visible, and recognise the powerful role girls can play in creating peaceful and safe societies. Specifically, this paper focuses on the opportunities for Australia to promote transformative practice through aid and foreign policy.

Our Vision

Providing adolescent girls with the opportunity to be leaders and change agents is essential to achieving gender equality and building peace. Adolescent girls can be leaders in their homes, their

communities, their schools, through business and work, political and public life, and in all facets of peace and security at a national and global level.

If we are to truly place affected populations at the centre of efforts to build peace, if we are to move from a focus on protection to a focus on prevention of conflict and violence, and if we are to apply an intersectional approach that recognises the unique interplay of age and gender, then we must ensure the Women, Peace and Security agenda is responsive to the distinct experiences and potential of adolescent girls.

Our vision is that Australia takes the opportunity to make adolescent girls visible in our next National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, by expressly referencing adolescent girls and championing the powerful role they can play in building peace, preventing conflict, advocating and advancing human rights.

What does this mean for Australian 2nd NAP?

In a world where we are witnessing some of the greatest humanitarian challenges of our time – with famine and food insecurity ravaging parts of Africa, climate change related extreme weather events sweeping across Asia and the Pacific, protracted conflict and fragility in places such as Yemen, Lake Chad Basin, South Sudan, Syria and Myanmar displacing millions of people and driving them across borders and seas – it is more important than ever to ensure that humanitarian, peace and security efforts protect and promote the rights of adolescent girls.

Over the coming years, Australia has an opportunity to make adolescent girls visible, for the first time ever, in our agenda on foreign policy, trade, overseas aid and development. Ensuring adolescent girls are visible in the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security is a vital step in this process.

It is positive that Australia's 2012-18 NAP champions the role of women and girls in peace and security. The opportunity now is to recognise that girls' experiences differ from those of adult women, and that girls must be visible in their own right in order to unlock their potential as agents of change.

By specifically highlighting the role of adolescent girls in the next NAP, Australia can affirm its position as a thought leader on gender equality in the development and humanitarian sphere, contributing to a stronger global understanding of the unique experiences of adolescent girls, and helping to unlock the power and potential of our next generation of women to transform their families, communities and countries.

Recommendations

Adolescent girls must be visible in Australia's next National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. Specifically:

- The NAP must not conflate the experiences of women with those of adolescent girls. Its policy statement should explicitly acknowledge that adolescent girls experience peace and conflict differently from men, boys and adult women, and that girls face exacerbated risks and dangers such as abuse, early marriage, early pregnancy, abduction and isolation. These differences arise largely from the distinct roles that girls play in their communities and homes, both in times of peace and conflict, and their respective status in society.
- The NAP should promote the important role of aid and foreign policy in supporting girls' leadership and inclusion. The NAP policy statement should outline the value of investing aid in programs that are designed to achieve gender transformative outcomes for adolescent girls, including programs that are youth-led or young women-led. The NAP should also

include a commitment that Australia will develop a standalone action plan for increasing investment in adolescent girls through aid and foreign policy.

- Through the NAP, Australia should champion the inclusion of girls' voices in international decision making structures and fora. This includes leading by example, by creating spaces for girls to be heard in the development of Australian foreign policy. Listening to adolescent girls to gain their views on their needs, fears and protection concerns is an important step and can be useful in recording vital information, skills and assets they need to overcome the negative consequences of conflict or displacement, and to mitigate their risks of experiencing violence.
- The NAP policy statement must recognise that adolescent girls have a vital role to play in building peace and security. Despite the challenges they face, adolescent girls can be powerful agents of social change, and must be involved as active participants in efforts to build peace. Specifically, the NAP should promote increased investment in programs that promote girls' activism to advance human rights, including increased funding to support spaces and movements that are youth-led or are otherwise focused on improving opportunities for girls to speak out and be heard.
- It is important to foster girls' leadership skills, such as decision making and negotiation, to equip girls with the knowledge that allows them to confidently express their views, negotiate power dynamics and influence and motivate others. The NAP policy statement should recognise, value and resource the leadership girls are already practising in 'informal' settings, and provide support to initiatives that are working to extend and deepen girls' leadership, resilience, wellbeing and sense of belonging. Synergies can be drawn with the Youth, Peace and Security agenda and its focus on youth leadership and agency.
- Within aid and humanitarian investments, girls' rights, needs and participation must be seen as 'core business', rather than an add-on to programs targeted at other groups. The NAP should promote a comprehensive, multi-sectoral and gender transformative approach that places adolescent girls at the centre of investment, design and delivery.
- The NAP policy statement must recognise the importance of robust data collection that counts adolescent girls as a distinct group, not simply as 'children' or 'women'. In aid and development policy, this means including measurement of reach and impact of programs on adolescent girls.
- In line with UNSCR 2250, the 2nd NAP implementation should include measures that support local girls' peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution, and that involve girls in the implementation mechanisms of peace agreements.

Want to know more?

[*Half A Billion Reasons: How investing in adolescent girls can change the world, Plan International Australia, 2018*](#)