

Children under attack

Stories of children
affected by the crisis in **Mali**





Giving children in Mali the future they deserve

When Aminata's mother collapsed as they fled their burning village, Aminata ran back towards their home to find help. That was when she herself was shot. Aminata survived, but her mother did not.

Food cannot replace a parent. A tent does not ease the violence of emotions at seeing family killed with your own eyes. And there are no set litres of water that drown the burning of homes.

Despite the efforts of the Government and civil society to ease the suffering of the population, in the first half of 2019, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in grave violations against children in the north and center of Mali, including in the areas bordering Niger and Burkina Faso. Repeated attacks have led to children losing lives, beloved parents and siblings, and homes. Children are being injured, abducted and recruited by armed groups, detained, separated from families, and exposed to violence, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, and psychological trauma. Children's access to education is increasingly being hindered by ongoing insecurity as well as attacks and threats on schools.

Moreover, the protracted nature of the crisis has increased vulnerabilities and affected the ability of families and communities to cope with recurrent shocks, including the effects of food insecurity, malnutrition and climate change.

In such a space hostility and harm survive. It is hard to show the nightmares of children, wrong to demand they display their tears. But while conflict and trauma are playmates, so too are resilience and peace.

UNICEF is on the ground with local authorities, other UN agencies, NGOs and civil society, helping the most vulnerable girls and boys recover and rebuild every day. But over 370,000 girls and boys in Mali are currently in need of protection services. They need support from trained community workers and social workers who speak their languages, who have the capacity, the expertise, the resources, to help heal their wounds and help them rebuild their future. To respond to this spike in needs, much more support is needed.

The bullet in Aminata's leg was removed in a hospital. She uses a crutch to walk, but she will no longer be able to run, nor participate in family and community life like before. But she is slowly rebuilding her childhood through learning, thanks to a temporary learning space set up in her displacement site and the psychosocial support she has been provided. No-one can replace her mother, and no one can unburn her home, but the fragile shell of childhood is beginning to grow around her again.

Together, we can make sure children in Mali are given the future they deserve.

Lucia Elmi
UNICEF Representative in Mali

Context

Seven years after the armed conflict broke out in northern Mali, and despite some progress after the signature of the Peace Agreement in 2015, insecurity has spread from the north to the center of the country, as well as in border areas with Niger and Burkina Faso.

The current crisis in Mali is complex and protracted and has profoundly disrupted the lives of millions of children and degraded the resilience of communities in Mali that were already under severe stress because of chronic poverty and recurrent natural disasters.

Children are paying the highest price of the violence in Mali. In the first half of 2019, preliminary data from the United Nations points to a sharp increase in grave violations against children, particularly in the killing and maiming of children, as well as recruitment and use.

Repeated attacks have led to children losing their lives, being injured by gunshot or burns, being displaced and separated from their families, and being exposed to violence including rape and other forms of sexual violence, arrests and detention, and psychological trauma. Children are also being recruited and used in armed groups and have been arrested or detained for association with armed groups. The safe access of humanitarian actors to children affected by the conflict remains a great concern. More than 147,000 people are currently internally displaced in Mali¹, and the majority of these are children.

The increase in grave violations has led to a spike in protection needs: UNICEF estimates that more than 377,000 vulnerable girls and boys currently require protection assistance².

In conflict children are the first to suffer and the last to be seen. These stories of conflict-affected children aim to reverse that.

1. OCHA Situation Report, 25 July 2019

2. 2019 Humanitarian Action for Children - UNICEF Humanitarian Response Plan 2019 - OCHA

Mali at a glance

175/188

Rank on Human Development Index (UNDP 2016)

57.9%

Population under 18 (2018 estimation, DNP)

377,000

Children in need of protection services (2019 Humanitarian Action for Children)

900+

Schools closed due to insecurity, affecting over 270,000 children (Education Cluster, June 2019)

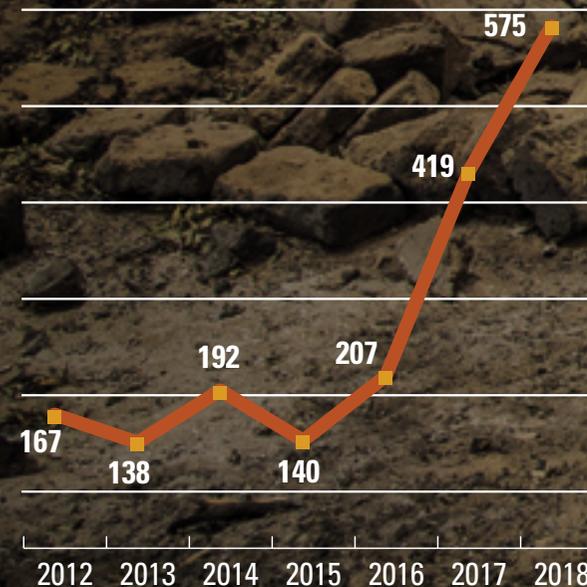
147,000+

Internally displaced persons, of which 76,000+ internally displaced children (OCHA Situation Report, 25 July 2019)

37%

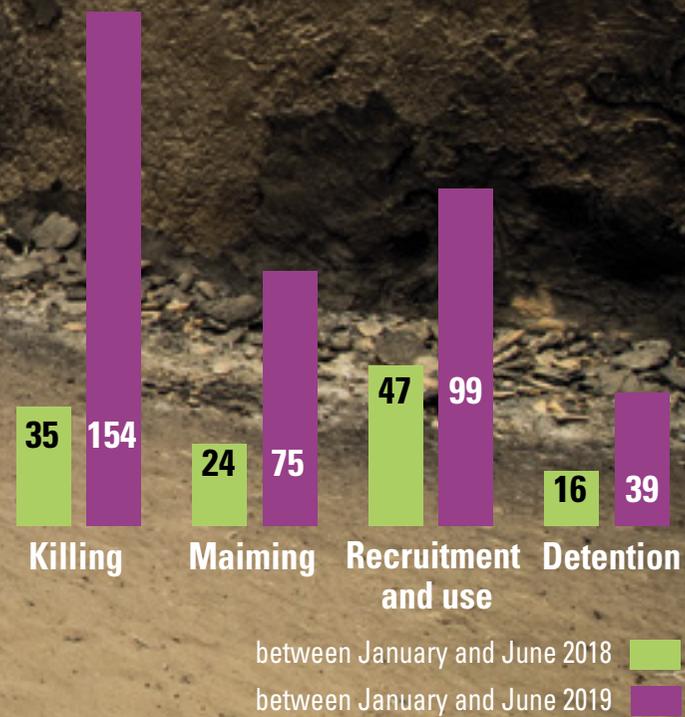
Increase in number of grave violations between 2017 and 2018 (2018 and 2019 Annual Reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict)

Trends in grave violations against children*



* Source: Annual Reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, 2013-2019

Read the Annual Reports here



Grave violations: 2019 vs 2018*

*United Nations data, 2019

“ In front of us, they killed my grandparents and two of my brothers. That is what pushed me to go where I should not have gone.”

Abdoulaye, Gao

Use of children in armed groups & detentions

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“ Child recruitment is never voluntary. Children are either abducted, or have their life choices and opportunities so reduced by poverty and insecurity that joining an armed group may seem like the only option.”

Daniela Luciani, Child Protection Manager at UNICEF Mali

Child recruitment and their association with armed groups remains a growing concern in Mali. **Hundreds of children** are still estimated to be in armed groups, though no precise data exists. Children may carry arms and be used in combat or be forced to work with the armed group in its operations, acting as spies, messengers, porters, cooks, or cleaning camps, vehicles and weapons. Girls may be sexually abused.

No child joins voluntarily. They are abducted or forced by circumstances in which they have no other options. Many children, especially those with no access to schools, perform essential community tasks such as herding animals far from their homes, which leave them vulnerable to abduction, especially in border areas. Children can also be abducted directly from villages.

Others who have witnessed atrocities may join armed groups out of concern for their safety or out of anger for the loss of loved ones. Still others who have no opportunity for advancement either in jobs or education may see joining an armed group as a chance to earn money and gain status.

In addition to recruitment and use, children can be detained for suspected association with armed groups. During military operations, children may be taken because they are found on battlefields, but also while they are going about their daily lives in insecure areas, performing duties such as herding their animals.

Education plays a key role in protecting children against recruitment and arbitrary detention by giving children stability, a safe space, and opportunities to build their future. By providing proof of age and identity, **birth registration** also plays an essential role in protecting children, as well as facilitating their release and reintegration if recruited or detained.

Child abduction often leads to children being killed, injured, recruited by armed groups or sexually abused, and even if rescued they can be so **traumatized** and scared that they conceal their identity and age, hampering efforts to identify them as children or return them to their families.

Despite these challenges, UNICEF is working with the UN family and humanitarian community, the Ministry of Promotion of Women, Children and Family, and local authorities and NGOs to bring help to the children that need it most.

In 2018, UNICEF and child protection partners assisted **114 children** formerly associated with armed groups, ensuring they were released in line with the 2013 Protocol of the Government of Mali on the transfer of children associated with armed forces or armed groups and received services including medical, food, **psychosocial support** and education while in interim care. They also received support for social and economic integration.

UNICEF also supports the government to expedite procedures to provide birth certificates to conflict-affected children who were not registered at birth. Finally, UNICEF and MINUSMA continue to train local social workers and government officials on how and why to separate children from adults if found. With its partners, UNICEF has also set up networks of skilled workers and transit centers across the country to make sure children find their families or a suitable **home**.

Recruitment or use of children under 15 as soldiers is prohibited and the legal age for any participation in hostilities is 18. Children associated with armed groups who are suspected of committing crimes should be considered primarily as victims of offenses of international law.

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict

“I blacked out. I don't remember what happened. All I remember was them firing on us and our animals.” Ismail



Ismail* was herding animals with his brother in a border area between Mali and Niger when they were fired upon. When he woke in a hospital he was told that his leg, injured in the attack, would have to be amputated. After the operation, he was taken to detention for questioning. Now released, he fears that it may take years to find his nomadic family again in the open lands on the border – and that he may never be able to herd animals again.

▶ Find out more about Ismail here.



When his town was occupied, young Abdoulaye* was told he could earn money if he agreed to wash the cars of an armed group. When the armed group was driven out, his grandparents and brothers were killed in front of him as suspected collaborators. Terrified, Abdoulaye saw no other option but to flee back to the armed group he had already been accused of being linked to. After the group was defeated, he was detained and questioned. Thankfully, he was then sent to a UNICEF-supported center designed for children like him, where staff helped him process his trauma and find his family. Today he is proud to be independent and the owner of new shop.

▶ Listen to Abdoulaye tell his story here.



Killing & maiming of children

“ I was with my mom and my family the night they attacked. I was shot in the leg. [Now] I can't run and play like other children. ”

Aminata, Mopti

“ The data paints a very disturbing picture of more children being injured in attacks and the consequences are devastating for them and their families. ”

Daniela Luciani, Child Protection Manager at UNICEF Mali

In 2018, a total of 77 children were killed in Mali due to the conflict. **In only the first half of 2019, over 150 children have already been killed.** The same sharp increase has been observed in **maiming**.

The injuries sustained by children include gunshot wounds, fractures, burns and mutilations. Some children have had to have their arms or legs amputated. Every month brings fresh reports of attacks on villages, and with it more increases in the number of children killed or maimed.

Children are killed or maimed when **their villages are attacked**, while they are being abducted or while serving as combatants or workers for armed groups.

Children who are maimed not only deal with physical disability and psychological trauma, they are at risk of social exclusion and of losing their ability to perform certain activities which require strength and mobility, such as farming or herding.

In addition, getting quality healthcare for disabled children is a challenge: poverty, fear, insecurity and challenges traveling between towns have all significantly limited the access of these children to healthcare.

Under international humanitarian and human rights law, killing and maiming of children is prohibited in conflict, along with mutilation, cruel treatment and torture. Parties to conflict are obliged to provide wounded and sick children with the medical care they require when circumstances allow and the destruction or targeting of hospitals or medical personnel is forbidden.

▶ Security Council resolutions 1261 (1999) and 1882 (2009)



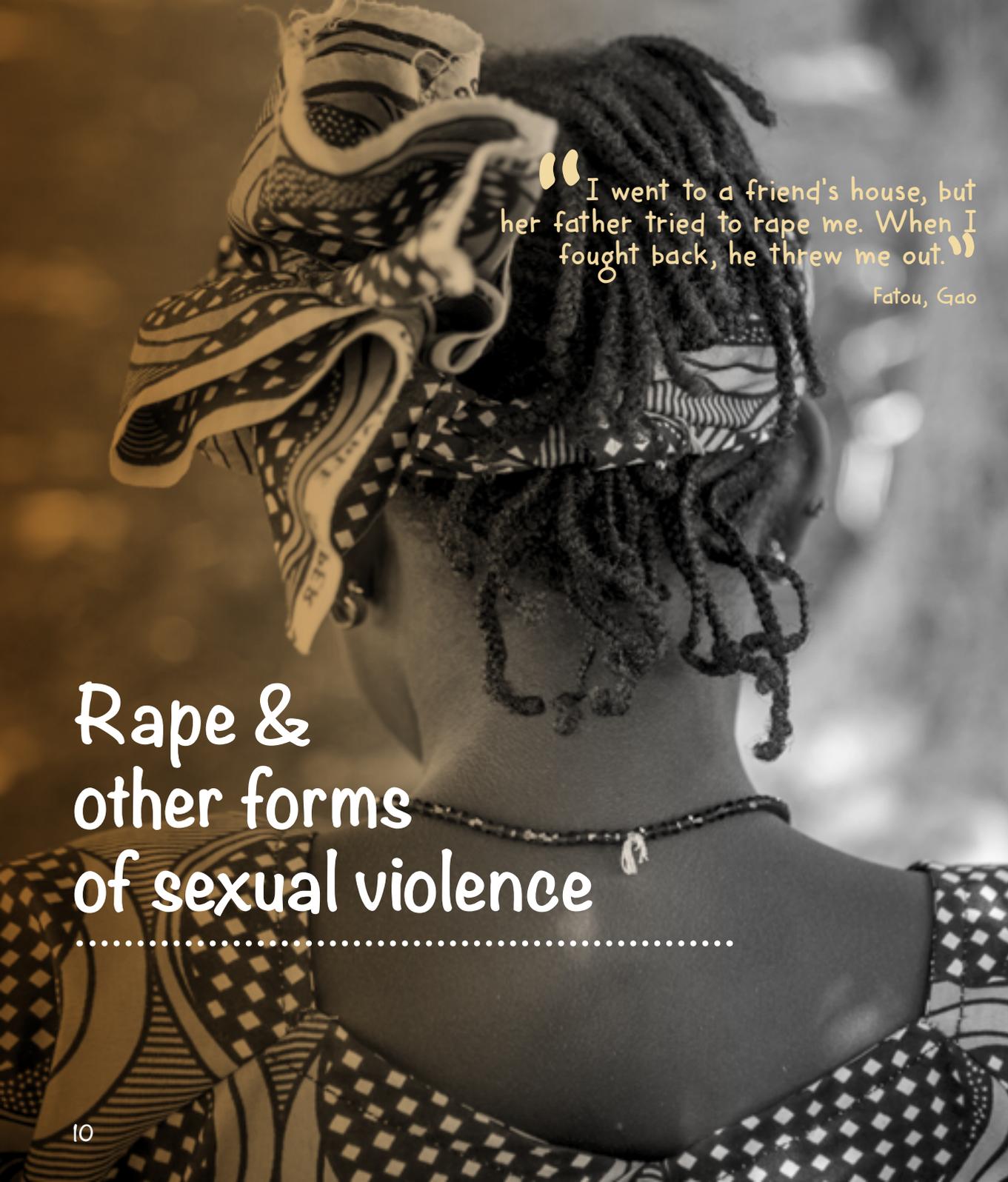
When Aminata* and her family heard rumors of attacks, they packed up their home and decided to move to a small village where they felt safe: Ogossagou. But then Ogossagou was attacked, leaving 85 children dead. She and her mother were shot. Her mother was killed, and she must now use a crutch to walk, perhaps for life. She is now living in a camp for internally displaced people. "I don't care where I go next," she says, "I just want to be somewhere that's at peace."

▶ Find out more about Aminata here



It was still dark when Maimouna got up to do her morning prayers. That was when her village was attacked. When her home was set on fire, her youngest daughter, 7-year-old Aminata, was trapped inside alone. When the child's body was found, Maimouna couldn't bring herself to look. One of the hardest parts, she said, was telling her other daughter, Hawa, that her little sister had died. 85 children died in the attack on Ogossagou village in March 2019.

▶ Read more about Maimouna's story here



“ I went to a friend's house, but her father tried to rape me. When I fought back, he threw me out. ”

Fatou, Gao

Rape & other forms of sexual violence

Even in areas of Mali not directly impacted by conflict, rape and other forms of sexual violence occur with **alarming regularity**. Between January and April 2019, more than 1,000 cases of gender-based violence, including rape, sexual assault and physical and psychosocial violence, were recorded. 60% of the victims were girls*. The conflict has aggravated the vulnerability of children, in particular girls, exposing them to rape, sexual abuse and exploitation. Girls may also be taken as 'wives' for combatants and leaders of armed groups. Rape and other forms of sexual violence against girls and boys has a long-term impact not just on the victim, but on their community as a whole.

Children, **especially girls**, who survive sexual violence do not just pay the price of physical injury and emotional scarring. They run the risk of being **ostracized, isolated and silenced**. Gendered social norms and the traditional roles of girls mean that these violations are the most under reported type of violation, and survivors may choose to remain silent in order to prioritize family and community harmony over their own individual rights and protections.

“ The Malian crisis is multidimensional and has had a huge impact on women and children. Children, mostly girls, have suffered from gender-based violence. We have recorded cases of rape in the northern regions. ”

Boukassoum Cisse,
Child Protection Specialist

* Gender Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS), 2019 and additional sources including local clinics, community women's association and police.

Abducted or internally displaced children are particularly vulnerable to rape and other forms of sexual violence, and the increased insecurity means that even those not directly affected by fighting are vulnerable. The closure of schools can expose girls to child marriage and early pregnancy, while insecurity limits avenues for victims to seek help by cutting off medical personnel and basic social services.

UNICEF and its child protection partners support care for girls and boys **who have survived sexual violence** based on their specific physical, psychosocial and family needs. Special measures are taken to reduce the stress on victims and reduce likelihood of new violations, such as having separate spaces in separate buildings for girls in transit centers. In 2019, UNICEF and its partners will provide 500 girl survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence with community care.

Rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, both girls and boys, are serious violations of international human rights law. Acts of sexual violence may constitute a war crime.

▶ International humanitarian law, Rule 93

At 13 years old, Fatou has just given birth.

When her mother died, she had to drop out of school and help earn money for her family. While working, she was pressured into having sex. When she became pregnant, her family threw her out of her home. When she found a different place to stay, a man attempted to rape her. She spent months pregnant and alone on the streets. The UNICEF-supported shelter that found her worked to reconcile her with her family and she and her baby are now at home.



▶ Listen to Fatou tell her story here.

“The bad men came and told the elders that they do not want to see those teachers at the school,” Fatoumata* remembers. Her teachers were asked to leave and her school was shut. Months turned into a year. As with so many girls whose education is interrupted, she was in danger of slipping out of education forever, leaving her vulnerable to early marriage, early pregnancy or migrating alone for work. Luckily, a community center for learning was set up in her village: a safe space where a local volunteer teaches lessons he learns on his radio. It is not the same as a school, but it allows her to stay in the habit of learning and it keeps her safe.



▶ Read more on Fatoumata's story here.

Psychological trauma

“We must do even more to meet the mental health needs of the children affected by armed conflict.”

Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director

“One of [the attackers] said, ‘don’t kill him, he has to see his house is burning’. Others said our throats should be slashed. I was so scared when I heard that.”

Ahmadou, Mopti

“For the thousands of people who have fled violence, beyond their physical needs, their recovery hinges on having specialized assistance.”

Ahmed Ould Sid'ahmed Ould Aida,
Chief Field Office, UNICEF Mopti

“[The boy's] eyes were red, and he could hardly speak. The only thing he could say was: ‘They killed my mother in front of my eyes.’”

Bouakary Keita, social worker

Whether experienced firsthand or witnessed as a member of a community under attack, extreme violence can leave **long-term scars** on children and impact their ability to grow up healthy and emotionally fulfilled. Children may deal with recurring nightmares and insomnia, become isolated, stop talking, lose their self-confidence and become scared of everyday sights and sounds, where even the sound of a motorbike can trigger fear.

Displacement and family separation can also have psychological consequences. Currently, more than **76,000 children are displaced in Mali***, and some of these are non-accompanied and separated, meaning they are without the protective care of their parents.

Though our partners on the ground in conflict-affected regions, UNICEF provides **psychosocial support** and sets up **community learning centers**, temporary learning spaces and child-friendly spaces in villages and sites for internally displaced families. These provide safe spaces where children can tell their stories and play specially chosen games that allow expression and recovery to begin. With the Ministry of Promotion of Women, Children and Family, UNICEF has also set up transit centers and supported temporary foster families to care for children on the move in four regions.

▶ *OCHA Situation Report, 25 July 2019

The Security Council has resolved that the protection of children from armed conflict is an important aspect of any comprehensive strategy to resolve conflict and should be a priority for the international community. The General Assembly and other UN bodies have repeatedly called for special protection afforded to children by all parties to conflict.

▶ Security Council statement, 31 October 2017



“They came at night and we heard gunshots and then we all started to run in different directions. I saw my whole village had been burned and I heard everybody screaming,” says Hamadou*. He and his brother and sisters watched as his village burnt in the distance, huddled in a tree. In the morning, his father was missing. His family sifted through the charred remains, took what they could, and fled. His father now exists in rumors: rumors that he’s been captured, rumors of worse. Hamadou now just wants his father to come home.

▶ Learn more about Hamadou’s story here.



When Leila* heard gunfire and men screaming she ran. “As I looked back I saw everything burning,” Leila says. “The next day we went back to the village. There was nothing left, just the ashes of our homes.” As with most children, an important part of her recovery is in making sure she gets an education, so she can view the future with hope. “I’ve not been in school for months. I’m excited that we’ll have a school so close.”

▶ Find out more about Leila here.



“It was terrifying when they held us at gunpoint, says Ahmed*, who was held with his father at gunpoint while bandits looted their home. “When they shot my dad I just screamed and collapsed on his fallen body. I see bandits in my nightmares. I cannot sleep because I’m worried.”

▶ Listen to Ahmed tell his story here.

UNICEF's asks to partners

- Commit to publicly advocating for the prevention and the end of grave violations against children.
- Pledge to support UNICEF's **Humanitarian Action for Children** call for US\$4 million to respond to increasing child protection needs of children and women in Mali.
- Provide direly needed support to the implementation of the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) of the child protection sub cluster in Mali (US\$9 million) for:
 - the scale up of age- and gender-sensitive psychosocial support services for conflict-affected children, including through child-friendly spaces;
 - long-term socio-economic reintegration for children (girls and boys) formerly associated with armed groups and prevention of further recruitment and use;
 - multisectoral assistance for survivors of conflict-related gender-based violence.
- Support the rapid expansion and availability of safe, temporary learning spaces for displaced and vulnerable children.
- Support medium and long-term solutions for the reopening of schools and for ensuring schools are safe, protective zones for learning, in line with the Safe Schools Declaration.

Thank you

UNICEF would like to thank all partners who work together to provide protection services to the most vulnerable children in Mali, including Belgium, Canada, the Department for International Development of the UK Government (DFID), Denmark, the European Union, Italy, Sweden, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and UNICEF France.

Further resources

- ▷ **Convention on the Rights of the Child**
- ▷ **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict**
- ▷ **Principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups ("Paris principles")**



Editorial and contacts

Creative concept and coordination: Eliane Luthi
Photography: Patrick Rose, Harandane Dicko, Seyba Keita
Copywriting and editing: Eliane Luthi and Anne Kennedy
Graphic design & Layout: Claire Mabile-ClairmabStudio, printed by STIPA

For more information on child protection in emergencies in Mali,
please contact:

- Daniela Luciani,
Child Protection Manager, UNICEF Mali dluciani@unicef.org
- Eliane Luthi,
Chief of Communication, UNICEF Mali eluthi@unicef.org

**All names of children have been changed*



Every child in Mali deserves a childhood
free from violence

unicef  | for every child