

# AFRAID TO GO OUTSIDE

## The impact of conflict on children in Afghanistan

### REPORT BRIEFING PAPER

Full report available upon request

For children in Afghanistan, the war has exacted a heavy toll of suffering and continues to pose a number of profound threats. Prolonged conflict exposes children to toxic levels of stress, affects their access to education and health facilities and exposes them to extreme violence. War has become so normal that children risk death or injury every day just going about their daily lives, like walking to school, playing with friends outside or going to the market. A comprehensive survey by Save the Children of nearly 700 parents and children across four conflict-affected provinces of Afghanistan paints a stark picture: children are increasingly too scared to go outside. For a great majority, their journeys to and from school are full of fear.

Widespread insecurity resulting from a conflict now in its 19th year and a lack of reliable data and access to affected populations are just some of the barriers to providing vital services to conflict-affected children in Afghanistan. To best support them it is necessary to understand how children have been affected by the war.

To address this gap in our knowledge, Save the Children in Afghanistan assessed the impact of conflict in aggravating child protection issues in Afghanistan, by speaking directly to children and their parents. Findings from the study seek to inform humanitarian programming and advocacy on how to best protect children affected by conflict in Afghanistan.

Data was collected over a two-week period in April 2019 in selected districts of Kabul, Balkh, Faryab and Sar-e-Pul provinces, followed by extensive analysis. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology was used, starting with a literature review. Thirty in-depth interviews with key actors in Afghanistan were conducted (6 female; 24 male), including relevant government officials at national and sub-national levels and national and international development partners. In addition, eight focus group discussions were conducted with children in the surveyed communities of target provinces. The quantitative data was collected through household surveys involving structured face-to-face interviews with 600 parents (50% female) and 90 children (50% girls).



## KEY FINDINGS

- 1 70% of parents surveyed indicated that armed clashes between Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and Armed Opposition Groups (AOG) pose the greatest threat to their children's safety. 62% of parents report that children have been personally impacted by the conflict.
- 2 The journey to and from school was considered to be unsafe by many parents and children, particularly girls, with 64% of parents and 43% of children stating that children, particularly girls, feel unsafe on their way to school either due to the risk of explosions and other acts of violence or because of sexual harassment among other threats. Rates of school enrolment for girls continue to lag behind those of boys. School enrolment rates for girls in the provinces surveyed ranged from 40% in Balkh to 73% in Kabul.
- 3 Almost three-quarters of parents whose children have been personally affected by conflict said their children showed signs of distress. The availability of appropriate child-focused counselling services is severely limited, particularly in rural areas. 59% of parents reported that their children had no access to such support services where they lived.



## QUOTES FROM CHILDREN

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*When fighting breaks out, no place is safe in our village, but home is still better than outside. We hide in the corners of rooms.*

*14-year-old girl, Saayad District, Sar-e-Pul, Afghanistan*

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*Fighting must stop so that we can study. When there is fighting, we cannot focus on our studies.*

*12-year-old boy, Sholgara District, Balkh*

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*I miss my friends when the school is closed. I stay at home when school is closed, because my mother does not allow me to go outside because of fighting.*

*14-year-old boy, Sholgara, Balkh*

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*My brother [14 years old] was near an attack on Darulaman [road], and after the attack, he was always scared and anxious. He would stand up [from his place] each time there was a sound at home, even sound of door closing.*

*17-year-old boy, Grade 10, Sayyed District, Sar-e-Pul*

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*We need peace, professional teachers and no violence.*

*14-12-year old boy, Faryab*

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“

*I did not go to school for one week last year, because of [parliamentary] election. There was a [polling] centre in our school, and fighting happened between candidates on the election day. And furniture in our school was also broken because of fighting.*

*17-year-old boy, Grade 10, Sayyed District, Sar-e-Pul*

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“

*The biggest problem for us while going to school is that boys harass us. I discussed it with my parents and teachers, but they cannot do anything about it.*

*12-year-old, Grade 6, Solgara district, Balkh*

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **1 Protection of children to and from school:**

One of the places where children feel least safe is on their way to and from school, with girls feeling more unsafe than boys. Girls participating in the survey cited unwanted attention, stalking, and harassment. If left unaddressed, this issue could potentially lead more parents to keep their daughters from attending school. Everyone, including the government of Afghanistan, international community, and local communities, should explore ways to ensure children's protection to and from school. Examples of this could be encouraging parents to create community 'school runs' where children are walked to school in small groups, accompanied by at least one adult or working with communities to make maps of the least safe places for children to go and encourage children to avoid these places. But ultimately, children shouldn't have to go to such lengths to stay safe. All state and non-state actors have a responsibility to ensure civilian areas remain off-limits in armed conflict and that children, schools and hospitals are never targeted.

### **2 Work with parents to recognize the common symptoms of emotional distress in their children and ways that they can help support and promote resiliency:**

Our findings show that parents are the main responders to children exposed to conflict and should be properly supported with the skills to recognize signs of distress, and to help support children's resiliency and well-being.

### **3 Ensure access to child-focused support and counseling services:**

A high proportion of children are suffering from common symptoms of traumatic experiences in the researched provinces. However, parents feel unable to effectively help children to cope while access to psychosocial services is severely limited. To address these issues, aid agencies and the Afghan government should scale up their mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) activities.

### **4 Mobile health clinics:**

Families do not often access health clinics owing to fear of attacks on route and a lack of qualified medical staff. This is particularly pronounced in Faryab, Balkh and Sar-e-Pul provinces. Mobile health clinics with set schedules would be useful for families. Mobile health clinics could be part of an integrated structure with both general physicians and mental health professionals.

### **5 Alternative pathways to education and learning for out-of-school children:**

Our research indicates a high proportion of out-of-school children, including child laborers, with more girls out of school than boys. Furthermore, of those that are enrolled, 36% of girls and 22% of boys do not regularly attend school. Also, displaced children face further barriers to education, resulting in 23% of displaced children not being enrolled in school. The high proportion of children who are out of school calls for alternative pathways to learning including informal and/or remedial education, life skills and resiliency as well as vocational opportunities.

### **6 Separate and dedicated facilities for girls and children with disabilities:**

Poor school infrastructure could discourage girls and children with disabilities from attending school. Eighty-five percent of parents reported the non-existence of separate washrooms for girls and boys and according to 94 percent of parents, toilets tailored to the needs of children with disabilities do not exist in schools. This marks an area warranting attention and action from the Afghan government.

## TO THE DONOR COMMUNITY

### **1 Increase funding for mental health programs**

to support children and for mobile health clinics, in particular in conflict-affected regions where access to healthcare is challenging. Ensure funding is aligned with the Government of Afghanistan's plans in coordination with the humanitarian and development communities.

### **2 Provide technical assistance and other forms of support to relevant ministries of the Government of Afghanistan to increase psycho-social support for children**

suffering due to the conflict, including by increasing the number of professional counselors and health workers.

### **3 Support the Afghan Government in developing and implementing national plans to improve child protection,**

including by supporting the implementation of the Law on Protection of Child Rights.