



# PROTECT US!

Inclusion of children with  
disabilities in child protection

Executive Summary

## Key findings

- Girls and boys with disabilities experience extremely high levels of violence compared to children without disabilities.
- Girls and boys with different types of impairments are vulnerable to many forms of violence, but violence is most noticeable for children with intellectual impairments and communication difficulties. In addition, girls with disabilities were more likely to report emotional and sexual violence than girls without disabilities.
- Children with disabilities find it difficult to access community-based child protection mechanisms, due to a range of barriers including environmental barriers, social barriers and institutional barriers.

## Recommendations for organisations

- Develop targeted programmes aiming to prevent and respond to violence against children with disabilities.
- Take concrete steps to ensure mainstream child protection programmes are accessible and inclusive.

- Build knowledge and capacity of child protection professionals and community-based volunteers on the rights, vulnerabilities and capacities of children with disabilities.

## Recommendations to governments

- Evaluate formal child protection services for accessibility and inclusion, and make necessary adaptations to ensure they are suitable for children with disabilities, regardless of type of impairment.
- Provide safe, inclusive education for all children.

## Recommendations for research

- Conduct research on the root causes of violence against children with disabilities, how they can be prevented, and how different elements of child protection systems can be made inclusive of and effective for children with disabilities.

This executive summary and the full report are available at:  
<https://plan-international.org/protect-us>

# PREFACE

Over the last year, the world has rallied behind the Sustainable Development Goals, with the guiding vision to “leave no one behind”. Yet, across the world, children with disabilities are experiencing grave violations of their rights. We know that children with disabilities are more likely to experience violence, less likely to go to school and more likely to live in extreme poverty.

Plan International implements programmes across the world aiming to protect all children against violence. Plan International Norway initiated this research with the aim of learning more about violence against children with disabilities and how we can better prevent and respond to it.

This research provides valuable insights into the lives of children with disabilities. It confirms that they are experiencing high levels of violence, and that they have difficulty accessing child protection mechanisms. It shows the need to learn more about the vulnerabilities of girls and boys with different impairments, and how we can develop and support child protection mechanisms that are inclusive of all children.

This is an extremely important piece of research. It shows that if we don't explicitly include, we exclude. I urge everyone working on child protection, children's rights and development to read it, learn from it, and join our call to action to protect all children with disabilities from violence.

Together, we can ensure children with disabilities are not left behind.



**Kjell Erik Øie,**

Programme Director, Plan International Norway  
Oslo, 2016

# INTRODUCTION

Violence against children, at home, at school and in the community, is extremely common. Every year, approximately one billion children around the world experience some form of violence (Hillis, 2016), and this often has a long-lasting negative impact on their lives.

Children with disabilities make up at least 93 million children worldwide and they are even more vulnerable to violence than their peers without disabilities (WHO, 2011). It is therefore important to make sure that child protection, the measures taken to prevent and respond to all forms of violence, is inclusive of children with disabilities.

Plan International is fully committed to promoting the realisation of children's rights including their right to protection from violence and abuse, and supports a wide range of child protection programmes around the world.

Plan International's Global Strategy for Child Protection Programming 2015-2020 'Protection from Violence is Every Child's Right' anchors child protection work within a systems approach<sup>1</sup> and identifies four priorities;

- Communities working together to protect children;
- Families providing care and protection;
- To support children and young people to contribute to their own protection;
- Governments developing integrated child protection systems and services.

1. A comprehensive, interactive and sustainable series of functions and structures including laws, policies, and services (at all levels) within a country with the purpose of preventing and responding to all forms of violence against all children in that country.

One central component of Plan International's child protection programmes is establishment of and support to community-based child protection mechanisms. Furthermore, Plan International is committed to ensuring that children with disabilities are empowered to fulfil their rights and are meaningfully included in all our work. Therefore, Plan International commissioned the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine in 2015 to assess how children with disabilities can be meaningfully included in community-based child protection mechanisms.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Three **complementary methodologies** were used.

- 1. A desk-based literature review** was conducted to understand how girls and boys with disabilities are catered for in the child protection field, as well as to identify successful strategies to include them in child protection programmes and formal services (collectively called mechanisms).
- 2. Findings from the Good School Study<sup>2</sup>, a quantitative study undertaken in Uganda** (2012-2014), were analysed to learn more about scale and type of violence experienced by children with disabilities, and to ascertain whether this school-based violence prevention programme was also effective for children with disabilities.
- 3. Qualitative research was undertaken in Uganda and Malawi** in 2015 with children with disabilities and their caregivers, as well as key informants and stakeholders, to explore their need for and use of child protection mechanisms.

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2. More information available from: <http://raisingvoices.org/good-school/>

# KEY FINDINGS

## Key findings on violence against children with disabilities

**Boys and girls with disabilities experience very high levels of violence.** The quantitative study shows that 84% of children with disabilities reported having experienced some form of violence at school in the past week, which was significantly higher than children without disabilities (54%). **Importantly, the types of violence were broadly similar comparing boys and girls with disabilities,** except higher levels of emotional violence from school staff reported by girls with disabilities.



**Photo:** A child with visual impairment makes a presentation on braille during a children's workshop

### Disability measurement

Disability was assessed using the 6 Washington Group Short Set questions, whereby children were asked if they experienced difficulties with walking, seeing, hearing, self-care, communication or remembering/concentrating. Response categories were 'no difficulty', 'some difficulty', 'a lot of difficulty' and 'cannot do' for each question.<sup>3</sup>

3. Children were classified as having a disability if they reported 'a lot of difficulty' or 'cannot do' in one or more domains, or if they reported 'some difficulty' in two or more domains. Children were classified as having some functional difficulties if they reported that they had 'some difficulty' in one domain only. Otherwise children were classified as having 'no disability'.

**Table** Forms of violence reported by children by disability status, by gender\*\* 4

	BOYS		GIRLS	
	No disability	Disability	No disability	Disability
<b>Prevalence of violence in past week</b>	N=730	N=33	N=787	N=71
<b>Total school violence</b>	56%	82%*	51%	85%*
<b>From school staff</b>				
Any violence	48%	70%*	46%	72%*
Physical violence	46%	70%*	46%	69%*
Emotional violence	9%	6%	8%	24%*
Sexual violence	0.4%	3%	0.8%	4%*
Any injury	26%	40%	28%	46%*
<b>From peers</b>				
Any violence	22%	48%*	19%	56%*
Physical violence	7%	27%*	9%	34%*
Emotional violence	18%	33%	13%	39%*
Sexual violence	0.7%	0%	0.3%	0%

\*statistically significant difference by disability status, within sex

\*\*control arm only

4. This is a simplified version of the table. The full analysis can be found in the full report available from: <https://plan-international.org/protect-us>

**Girls with disabilities were more likely to report emotional and sexual violence than girls without disabilities.** Girls with disabilities reported significantly higher levels of emotional violence from school staff (24%) and peers (39%) than girls without disabilities (8% and 13% respectively). These differences were not significant among boys.

The quantitative study showed that girls with disabilities were significantly more likely to report sexual violence by school staff (4%) than girls without disabilities (0.8%). These figures may underestimate the true scale of sexual violence, as the quantitative study only asked about experiences at school, and because sexual violence is a highly sensitive topic and may be under-reported. Whilst not providing further insights into the prevalence of sexual violence experienced by children with disabilities, the qualitative study nevertheless noted high levels of concern about the vulnerability of girls with disabilities to sexual violence.

**“I worry about boys. They can pregnant her, and they [she] can’t say he did this to me. Some people advised me to take her to family planning services because she already started menstruation in tenth month last year.”**

**Mother of a 14-year-old, intellectually impaired daughter.**

**Negative social and cultural norms within the community around disability** were a key theme identified throughout the study, which may contribute to increased vulnerability to violence. In particular, a view that children with disabilities are perceived as “useless” and that they are seen as being an “easy target” for violence.



“The parents have rejected these children with disability because they say that they are good as nothing. Now we have been going for seminars and they teach us to regard all the children as one no matter the disability. But the fact is that these children are being isolated.... The reason as to why they [the parents] isolate these children is because people think that they are very useless. There is nothing good in them...”

**Mother of a 14-year-old daughter with epilepsy.**

**The high vulnerability to violence among boys and girls with disabilities** was apparent across all forms of violence and all types of impairment in the quantitative study. But **it was most noticeable for children with intellectual impairments and communication difficulties**, which reiterates findings from previous studies such as the ‘Outside the Circle’ study conducted by Plan International in West Africa in 2013.<sup>5</sup>

5. Available from: <https://plan-international.org/outside-circle>

## Key findings on the use of child protection mechanisms by children with disabilities

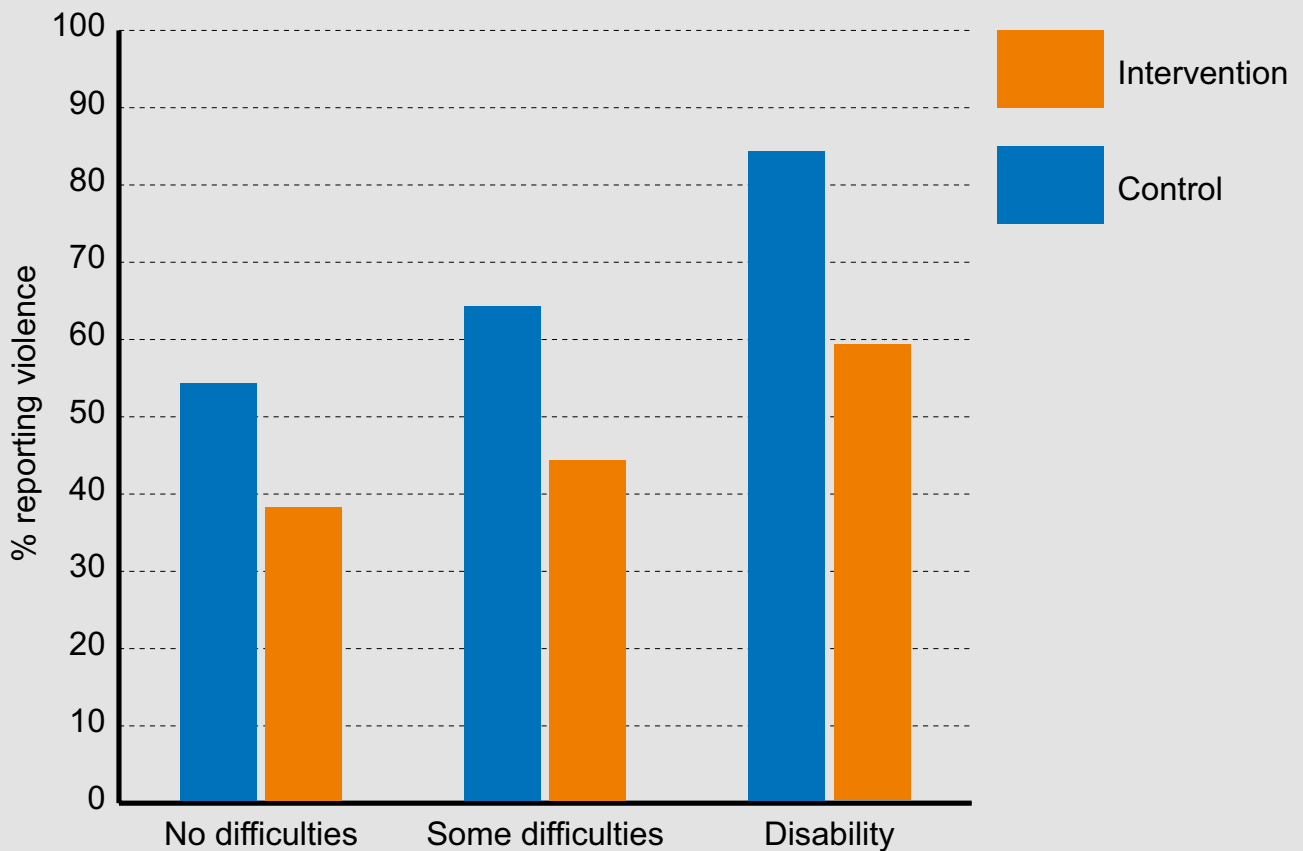
**The Good School Toolkit is an effective approach for reducing violence towards both children with disabilities and children without disabilities in schools.** Reports of violence were significantly higher among children who had not participated in the Good School Toolkit programme<sup>6</sup> (control group) compared to those who were part of the programme (intervention group), indicating that the intervention reduced violence. Importantly, this reduction in violence existed for all children – including those without disabilities, those with some difficulties in functioning, and those with disabilities.

This study shows that a community-based child protection programme aimed at all children can certainly benefit children with disabilities. However, children with disabilities still experienced very high levels of violence after the intervention. Furthermore, this school-based programme would not have benefitted the many children with disabilities who are not attending school and it is known that children with disabilities are often ten times less likely to go to school (Kuper, 2014). The study therefore shows the need for targeted community-based child protection mechanisms for children with disabilities, including those in school and out of school, in addition to their inclusion in mainstream programmes aimed at all children.

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6. The **Good School Toolkit** is a type of community-based child protection programme. It is a methodology created to help educators and students explore what makes a healthy, vibrant and positive school and guide them through a process to create their vision. It is targeted at staff, students and the school administration. The main activities are related to creating a better learning environment, respecting each other, understanding power relationships, using non-violent discipline and improving teaching techniques.

**Figure 1** Percentage of students reporting violence in the past week from peers or school staff



### **Access to and use of community-based child protection**

**mechanisms was low among children with disabilities**, despite their high levels of reported violence. In the quantitative analysis only 28% of children with disabilities who were referred to child protection during the Good School Study because of what they reported on violence, had previously ever disclosed to anyone. Similarly, very few children with disabilities had accessed child protection mechanisms in the qualitative studies in Malawi and Uganda, despite the fact that many had experienced violence.

**Children with disabilities face a range of barriers to accessing child protection mechanisms.** The barriers were relatively similar across the two qualitative study sites (Malawi and Uganda) and within the literature review. They include the following:

- **Environmental barriers** which limit physical access to child protection mechanisms. Programmes and services were often located far away in urban centres, making them physically difficult to access for children with disabilities. This was particularly true for children with physical or visual impairments. Access to transport was often the most important environmental barrier, but inaccessible facilities were also noted.
- **Social barriers**<sup>7</sup> which arise through interaction of children with disabilities and the wider community. For instance, many children with disabilities had difficulties communicating, which stopped them from reporting violence or engaging with child protection mechanisms. As one mother explained:

**“People beat him up and sometimes he comes back home crying and with bruises on his face... [and] his body swollen from the beatings. He goes straight in bed and cries himself to sleep... It worries me and sometimes I feel like crying because my child goes through that; if he was able to speak, he would be able to point out who does those things to him.”**

**Mother, talking about her son, aged 14, who has an intellectual impairment.**

7. The term ‘social barriers’ includes all barriers related to interaction and communication, including attitudes, perception and information. It is noted that there is a variety of slightly different systems available for categorisation of barriers used by different organisations working on disability.

These communication barriers also made it difficult for some children with disabilities to access child protection mechanisms directly, without the help of an adult. Furthermore, the study found that communication barriers arise not only from the difficulties children with disabilities have communicating, but also because of the lack of tools and knowledge of parents, carers and child protection actors on how to communicate effectively.

Concerns were expressed about discriminatory attitudes and misconceptions among people delivering child protection about children with disabilities and their need for child protection. There was a perception amongst those interviewed that this discrimination leads to cases involving children with disabilities being de-prioritised, ignored and not responded to adequately.

Q. Would you go to report that to the chief by yourself? “No.”

Q. Why would you not go alone? “He would look down on me and not listen to what I have to say.”

Girl, 15, who has a visual impairment.

Children with disabilities and their caregivers also often lacked information about where they could access child protection mechanisms, and this was particularly notable in Uganda.

- **Institutional barriers** which arise when policies, laws and institutions overlook the needs of persons with disabilities or prevent their full participation. At the national and international level, international conventions such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and national laws and policies support the need for inclusion of children with disabilities in child protection systems.

However, there were few specific strategies and commitments in place to ensure the child protection mechanisms were inclusive of children with disabilities, and existing policies were not actively implemented. As one key informant in Uganda explained:

**“Most of these policies are on paper, signed, but they have not been implemented.”**

**Key informant, District Persons with Disabilities Organisation**

Notably, across the literature review and qualitative research in Uganda and Malawi, almost no child protection staff or volunteers received training to support alternative means of communication (e.g. use of sign language, Braille, audiovisual methods etc).

**Consequently, each component of the child protection system excluded children with disabilities: from inaccessible preventive sensitisation and education campaigns to the lack of trained individuals involved in identifying, responding to and providing support for victims of violence.**



Photo: A girl at a workshop on child protection

# A CALL TO ACTION!

## Recommendations for more inclusive child protection programmes

The unacceptably high levels of violence experienced by girls and boys with disabilities and the multiple barriers they face to access child protection clearly highlight the need for more concerted action to better prevent and tackle the endemic violence against children with disabilities. The following recommendations are a call to action – for all organisations working on child protection, NGOs, governments, donors and researchers.

### Recommendations for Plan International and other actors working on child protection

- **Adopt a twin-track approach to disability inclusion, combining inclusive mainstream programmes with targeted initiatives for girls and boys with disabilities, across all programmes.**

Importantly, this study confirms that girls and boys with disabilities face widespread exclusion and multiple, interlinked forms of vulnerability related to healthcare, education and poverty. The right to be protected from violence cannot be viewed in isolation. A key recommendation is therefore that the twin-track approach is applied across the board, to programmes related to child protection as well as within education and job training, income generation, health and so on.

- **Develop programmes targeted specifically at preventing violence against children with disabilities.** This study confirms that levels of violence against children with disabilities are very high. This

shows the need to develop targeted initiatives within larger child protection programmes with the aim of preventing violence against all children with disabilities. Yet, this study also suggests a need to focus particularly on prevention of violence against children with intellectual impairments and communication difficulties. In addition, the vulnerability of girls with disabilities should be taken into account in relation to emotional and sexual violence. These programmes should be developed in close collaboration with persons and children with disabilities and disabled persons' organisations (DPOs).

- **Support community-based groups working on child protection.**

Such groups can help overcome the barriers to access child protection mechanisms faced by children with disabilities and their caregivers, and provide support in identifying and accessing help. However, members of such groups should receive training on the rights, vulnerabilities and capacities of children with disabilities to ensure that negative attitudes towards disability prevalent in the community are not stopping children with disabilities from receiving support or resulting in further harm. These groups should also include persons with disabilities directly, as volunteers and role models, and could cooperate with parent support groups for children with disabilities. They should be evaluated to make sure that they are appropriate and effective for children with disabilities. In addition, it is important for community-based groups to have strong links with formal child protection services.

- **Ensure active participation of children with disabilities in the design, implementation and evaluation of child protection mechanisms and actively share information with them.**

The perspective of children with disabilities is critically important to developing robust, child-sensitive prevention and reporting



mechanisms. Accessible participatory methodologies should be applied to ensure their meaningful participation throughout. This must be planned and budgeted for. Increased awareness amongst children with disabilities, their families and caregivers, on existing child protection mechanisms is crucial to ensure greater access.

- **Provide training and sensitisation on disability inclusion for child protection professionals and volunteers.** There is a need for greater awareness of the rights, vulnerabilities and capacities of children with disabilities so that those on the ‘front line’ have the positive attitudes, behaviours and communication skills necessary to meaningfully engage with children with different types of impairments. This will also help them recognise early signs of violence and abuse and respond in a timely and comprehensive manner. **In addition, cross-sector collaboration between civil society actors such as NGOs, disabled persons’ organisations (DPOs) and governments should be encouraged.**
- **Advocate for more inclusive national child protection systems and safe, inclusive education.** The state is the primary duty-bearer responsible for ensuring the protection of children with disabilities as well as safe, inclusive education for all children. Plan International and other civil society actors play a crucial role in advocating for and collaborating with government to ensure the provision of inclusive child protection systems at national and local levels, as well as the provision of quality inclusive education for all girls and boys with disabilities.

## Recommendations for governments

- **Improve accessibility of formal child protection services** to reduce the barriers faced by children with disabilities in accessing services. This includes having a specific focus on disability inclusion and accessibility in budgeting and planning processes as well as ensuring training on sign language for those working in child protection.
- **Ensure information about violence and child protection is accessible and in multiple formats** to ensure that information is widely available and accessible to boys and girls with different types of impairments and to their parents or caregivers. This information should be age and gender sensitive.
- **Provide access to safe, inclusive education.** This is an important right itself, but enrolment in school can also provide better access to child protection for children with disabilities, provided that schools are safe and inclusive. It is the responsibility of governments to ensure inclusive education is budgeted and planned for. This implies a focus on physical infrastructure, teaching methodologies and materials as well as the awareness and attitudes of children, parents and caregivers, teachers, supervisors and school administration. This is particularly important, as caregivers in the qualitative study seemed to perceive that special education schools were safer places for their children, but this requires further investigation.

**“[If he were to go to school] kids [here] will stop teasing him because they will respect him because of the education he is getting. He will also stop wandering around the community [which might] prevent the violence [he is experiencing].”**

**Mother discussing her 14-year-old son, who has an intellectual impairment.**

## Recommendations for research

- **Conduct comprehensive research projects on violence against boys and girls with disabilities in multiple settings and countries.** There is a need for greater understanding about why children with disabilities are more vulnerable to violence, including the different vulnerabilities and barriers experienced by boys and girls with different types of impairments. This research should include boys and girls with disabilities and use appropriate participatory methodologies.
- **Develop and test interventions to prevent and respond to violence against children with disabilities.** In line with the twin-track approach, this should include mainstream child protection interventions, which should be evaluated for their inclusiveness and effectiveness for girls and boys with disabilities, and also interventions which are specifically designed to address the vulnerabilities of children with disabilities.

**This research highlights that the rights of girls and boys with disabilities to be protected from violence are being violated, and that much more needs to be done to keep all children safe.**

**In line with the aspiration of the Sustainable Development Goals to “leave no one behind” and with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, we therefore call upon Plan International and all other development actors to work together to stop the widespread violence against boys and girls with disabilities, and take concrete steps to include them in child protection mechanisms.**



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## **ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL**

Plan International is an independent global child rights organisation committed to supporting vulnerable and marginalised children and their communities to be free from poverty. By actively connecting committed people with powerful ideas, we work together to make positive, deep-rooted and lasting changes in children and young people's lives. For over 75 years, we have supported girls and boys and their communities around the world to gain the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to claim their rights, free themselves from poverty and live positive fulfilling lives.

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**Cover photo © Plan International - A child with physical impairment**