



Until we are all equal



Above: One of the young girls who is now back in school. Left: An outdoor informal class where children get a chance to reboot their learning.

# IMAGINE the Future in Mali

Despite years of conflict, in Mali, the kora still plays a song of hope. In this report, you'll meet some of the 106,088 girls who are enrolled in life-changing education programs.



In this report, you'll learn what we were able to achieve with your support in Year 3 of this four-year project.

## Project facts

**WHAT:** The IMAGINE project – Improving Adolescents Girls' Inclusive Education – promotes equality for girls by supporting their education, protection and youth leadership. The project focuses particularly on girls whose education has been disrupted by armed conflict.

**HOW:**

- Increase the ability of girls in crisis-affected communities to access and complete their basic education
- Improve inclusive conflict-sensitive education environments for girls
- Work with teachers and governments to improve girls' access to quality education during crisis
- Equip girls and their communities to advocate for every girl's right to learn

**WHERE:** The project is being implemented in the Ségou and Mopti provinces of Mali.

**WHEN:** Year 3 of this four-year project ran from April 2022–March 2023.

**WHO:** IMAGINE is a joint project with World Vision and Save the Children and is funded by Global Affairs Canada and individual Canadian supporters.



A girl learns to read in learning centre.

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Irihan finally got to start school, and she's not looking back!

# The First Word

Ensuring that girls get an education is one way to build a peaceful future in Mali.

"The connection between education and peace is very, very important," says Kouame Aime, an education advisor for Plan International Canada who works on the IMAGINE project.

"Everything we are doing in this area is affected by conflict," he continues. "The lack of peace is the root cause of the issues the people are facing."

Since 2015, ongoing inter-ethnic fighting in Mali has had a devastating impact on children. The education sector has been decimated, with schools destroyed and teachers forced to flee. Today in the areas where Plan International is working, 100 schools are closed.

"It's not like a normal setting where you have schools, children are going to school, you have teachers. No, no," Aime says. "In some places, the schools and the teachers have all left, so the areas are empty and there's no one to take care of the children. Children cannot go to school. Even when schools are open, there are a lot of dropouts. And for the girls, it is always worse than for boys."

So Aime and his colleagues must be imaginative when designing programs to restore children's education. Where there are no schools open, it is particularly difficult.

"To support home learning, we provide radios with pre-recorded materials for children to access with community



Children listen to pre-recorded lessons on radios provided by Plan International.



The opportunities you get in life can be through what you learn. When we educate girls, it can change things. So this project has the intention of giving more opportunities to girls."

– Kouame Aime, education advisor, Plan International

facilitators," explains Aime. "These are not teachers, because it is dangerous to have a set-up that looks like a school, so [the facilitators] go family to family. It is important to provide education despite the conflict. This work is really meaningful."

Thank you for your continued support.



# The Situation

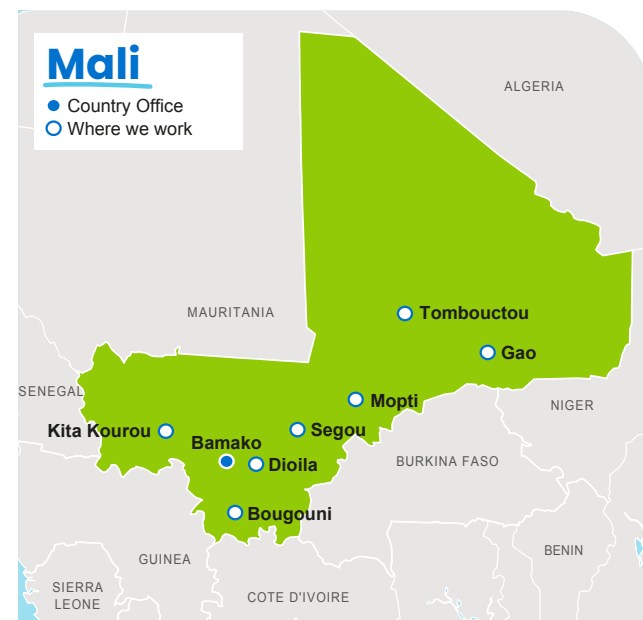
When conflict arises, children’s education is one of the first casualties. Here’s why that matters.

The present-day cultures of Mali have strong connections to the historical legacy of the Mali Empire, a powerful and influential medieval state in West Africa. Mali was one of three major Sudanic empires before colonization, along with Ghana and Songhai. Mali includes Timbuktu, a renowned centre of trade located along the upper Niger River. Over many years, caravans crossed the Sahara Desert from North Africa and others traveled from the southern forests, all meeting at the important junction of Timbuktu, a centre of education and commerce.

## A RICH CULTURAL HISTORY

Mali has a diverse mix of ethnic groups that have influenced its rich artistic traditions over centuries. Today, the country is celebrated for its contributions to African music. Artists such as Salif Keita, Fatoumata Diawara and Bassekou Kouyate are internationally recognized and praised by fellow musicians.

But musicians in Mali today face a difficult future. Since 2012, conflicts and crisis have been ongoing across the country, with multiple ethnic and religious groups clashing. The violence



has forced many artists to leave for the safety of Europe. But that isn’t an option for many citizens, who are left to fend for themselves as rival militias tear the country apart.

## CONFLICT AND EDUCATION DON’T MIX

As with conflict everywhere, children’s education in Mali has been one of the first casualties, with existing gender inequalities leaving girls faring the worst. In the Ségou and Mopti provinces, where the Improving Adolescents Girls’ Inclusive Education (IMAGINE) project operates, schools have been closed and often destroyed, with teachers forced to flee. In some areas, children are unable to receive any education and are falling further and further behind. Even where schools are open, dropout rates are high.

The IMAGINE project has devised informal strategies to keep children, especially girls, educated despite these impossible circumstances. In areas where schools are reopening, project staff implement what is called “accelerated education”: When children are years behind in their education due to prolonged absences, they need to catch up before they can rejoin class. The accelerated



A rural scene in Mali

education is a nine-month program that packs in two to three years’ worth of curriculum to get students back up to speed. The program has been remarkably successful, seeing an 80–90% successful transfer rate back into the education system.

In some areas, however, there are no schools, and the teachers have all left. Even if there were teachers, it would be too dangerous for schools to reopen, as anything that looks like a school is a potential target. So the IMAGINE team devised a creative solution: If girls couldn’t come to school, Plan International would take school to the girls.

## INNOVATIVE LEARNING APPROACHES

Staff members distribute radios with pre-recorded materials on a USB key. Community facilitators, rather than teachers (who would be under threat), travel from home to home, explaining how to operate the equipment and listening along with the children. It is not curriculum work, but it keeps them learning. In a conflict environment, this is something of a miracle.

Ultimately, only peace will allow Mali’s schools to flourish. Until then, Plan International staff and our partners in Mali are putting their lives on the line to keep the song of hope alive.

“According to the advice I received from my friend, Modibo, having a birth certificate is a child’s right and an obligation for the child’s parents, and being enrolled in school is another right. All this was really new to me.”

– Samson, a student who shared this after attending a peer-to-peer session with his teenage friend

106,088 girls are currently enrolled in education-related programs in Mali

1,500 children have participated in accelerated-learning programs.



# The Rundown

Thanks to contributors like you, we helped significantly improve education for girls in Mali in Year 3 of the project.

By the Numbers

HERE'S HOW:

> **91,094** girls were reached by the project in the last year.

> **5,090** teachers were trained in teaching practices adapted to the needs of children in crisis-affected areas.

> **372** education officials, including the mayors responsible for education in 68 communes, were trained in gender equality and barriers to girls' education.

> **8,714** girls completed formal education in 2023.

> **106,088** girls are currently enrolled in the project's schools.

> **648** active reading camps were established.

> **65%** of teachers trained have adequate knowledge and positive attitudes toward providing inclusive, quality, gender-sensitive and crisis-responsive education.

> **678** women's rights organizations mentored 2,299 adolescents in how to lead dialogues in their community to shift attitudes about girls' education.

> **598** peer-to-peer education initiatives were carried out by adolescent girls trained in life skills and gender equality.

> **9,004** adolescents were trained and supported in life skills that promote gender equality.

> **715** teenage-led intergenerational dialogues took place, covering issues related to education, protection and peacekeeping.

> **30** home and community learning initiatives helped girls unable to attend school.

> **1,190** children participated in home and community learning initiatives.

> **583** children participated in accelerated-education programs.

> **21,480** students attended remedial classes for children at risk of dropping out of school.

> **270** teachers were trained in implementing remedial classes for children at risk of dropping out of school.

> **903** school safety and resilience plans were developed to address gender-based violence in schools, sexuality education and crisis preparedness.

> **46** schools were fitted with accessible, gender-sensitive and sustainable washrooms.

These students are participating in accelerated-learning classes that help them get back on track.



## MAKING THE GRADE

**94%** of students in accelerated-education programs passed calculus

**94%** passed reading

**98%** passed diction



A STORY OF CHANGE

# Mariam's Story of Hope

She's back in school and plans to one day become a midwife.

At age 10, Mariam had never been to school. She lost her parents when she was young, and her grandparents are raising her. Even before the conflict started in Mali, it was not unusual for girls to help with work around the home instead of going to school; once the violence started, Mariam's grandfather decided not to send her. She was one of thousands of children out of school in the Ségou and Mopti regions when Plan International began the IMAGINE project.

Mariam would see other children going to school, and it upset her deeply. She was envious of them – it was her dream to one day join them.

To increase school attendance by girls like Mariam, the IMAGINE team conducted a series of sessions with community leaders to raise awareness of the importance of education for children, and girls in particular. Mariam's grandfather was persuaded that it was time to let her fulfill her dream.

Mariam couldn't go straight to school, though, because she was several years behind. Fortunately, there was an IMAGINE accelerated-learning centre set up in her village.



Mariam was a regular attendee, and within eight months she was at a high enough standard to enter Grade 5 and join classes at her local primary school.

Mariam's headmaster has been impressed. "She is a committed student with a thirst for knowledge," he says.

And Mariam is over the moon. "I had given up all hope of being where I am today," she shares. "I'm starting to have hope of fulfilling my dream of being a matron after my studies – I want to serve my community as a midwife. Not only was I the only one to be transferred to Grade 5, but I was also top of my class! Now I can read fluently, write correctly, calculate and speak French. I'm very happy that I can go to school and find friends there. I'll do everything I can to succeed."

Mariam's grandfather has no regrets. "In our community, many girls don't go to school, and among those who do, there are a lot of dropouts. That's why girls' education is a challenge that I've decided to get particularly involved in," he says. "Mariam's schooling gives me great hope that she will become a future leader in this country."

**Mariam is back in school with the support of her grandfather (below), who cheers her on.**



A STORY OF CHANGE

# Powerful Conversations

Now that she knows her rights, nothing is going to stop Hawa.

Hawa is 14 years old and in Grade 8. She has always been a joiner and an active member of her youth group. The group holds meetings to discuss the numerous issues faced by teenagers in a community living with violence, poverty and food shortages brought about by ongoing conflict. It was no surprise, then, when her group was chosen to take part in the IMAGINE project's training sessions to build life skills that promote gender equality.

The trainings go beyond trying to improve the conditions for women and girls. They equip trainees to advocate for change in the position and status that women and girls hold in society. In these sessions, Hawa took part in debates and discussions, role playing and sketch presentations, and practical exercises. Over six months, the teenagers covered a range of topics including living together in solidarity, child rights, the culture of peace, gender-based violence, communication and leadership. "I learned that a child has the right to an education and a birth certificate [so they can enrol in school]," Hawa says. "We also learned that men and women have the same rights, because what a man can do, a woman can also do. Except for giving birth and breastfeeding. Those are things men cannot do."



**Hawa is a young leader who is learning how to champion girls' rights.**



A STORY OF CHANGE

# Happier Days Ahead

Irihan fast-tracked her studies and has now joined her peers.



Irihan is back to her studies after completing an intensive nine-month accelerated program.

It was early in the morning, a few months before Irihan was supposed to start school, when the gunfire was first heard. That was the moment Irihan's world was turned upside down. She had always been a happy, outgoing child. She loved playing outside and had friends she could call on. She had been looking forward to the new adventure of going to school.

But when the war came to her village, the teachers were forced to flee for their lives. The school was closed, and, it seemed to Irihan, her life was shut down. It was dangerous to go outside on her own, so she spent most of her time inside with her mother and grandparents, doing household chores.

She was lonely and became sullen and withdrawn. Boredom turned to frustration, and she frequently took it out on her family. The future looked very bleak to her. But then, shortly after her eighth birthday, things changed. The fighting moved on, meaning she could go outside more often. Better still, news came that the school was reopening. Irihan could see a light at the end of the tunnel.

But she needed to catch up on the schooling she had missed before starting class. Having never been to school before, she had missed a lot. Fortunately, the IMAGINE project



established a centre for just that purpose. Irihan began taking classes that were designed to condense years of school into a few months of intensive lessons. She threw herself into her studies, and nine months later, she was ready to fulfill what had seemed an impossible dream and finally go to school.

“The nine months I spent at the IMAGINE centre enabled me to read and write properly, even though I'd never been to school before,” Irihan says. “It's through the centre that I've learned to greet my mom and dad every morning when I wake up, and I understand that I need to respect the elders. I also learned how to solve some of practical problems through addition, subtraction, division and multiplication. I also discovered a lot about my own village, including its history and geography. I'm very happy to go to mainstream school. When I grow up, I want to become a teacher so that I can pass on my knowledge.”

**“I'm very happy to go to mainstream school.”**

– Irihan, student and IMAGINE project participant



Inside one of the IMAGINE project's accelerated classrooms

## Thank you for your commitment to the safety, growth and education of children.

Thank you for joining us as we support adolescent girls in Mali in defying the odds and getting the education that is their right. For Year 4 of the project, we hope to see more girls returning to school and more young leaders spreading the word about child rights, peace and gender equality.

**Thank you again for your continued support.**





Until we are all equal



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**Accredited**  
IMAGINE CANADA

**HUMANITARIAN  
COALITION** //

Students attend classes as part of an accelerated-learning program designed to get them back to school.

For more information,  
please contact:  
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## About Plan International Canada

Plan International Canada is a member of a global organization dedicated to advancing children's rights and equality for girls. Plan International has been building powerful partnerships with and for children for over 85 years and is now active in more than 80 countries. We stand with children, especially girls, wherever they are oppressed, exploited, left behind or not equally valued. We're determined optimists, and we will continue to persevere until we are all equal.