



Research & studies

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Knives at school: Gender norms and instruments of violence in Chad

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About the Saha wa Tarbia project

The project's objective is to strengthen the resilience of communities in the Lake, Kanem and Barh El Gazal provinces through enhanced access to health and education services for vulnerable populations with a focus on women and girls.

The project is implemented by a consortium of 4 organizations: Action Contre la Faim (ACF), the Association des Femmes Juristes du Tchad (AFJT), the Association pour le Développement Economique et Social du Lac (ADESOL) and HI.

The project, and the research, were made possible with support from the Agence Française de Développement (AFD).



A. Context

In 2024, HI deployed a pilot conflict transformation research within its Inclusive Education project Saha wa Tarbia to look into the connections between traditional gender norms and instruments of violence. More specifically, we set out to ask adolescent girls and boys along with the wider school community about the practice of carrying a knife. Although Chadian law along with international standards explicitly prohibits the presence of weapons in schools, many male students 10 and up come to school armed with a knife. Sometimes dismissed as a traditional practice or a necessity for children living in rural areas, the practice creates risks of conflict escalation and has contributed to high levels of violence in school environments but also more widely in gender relations among youth in Chad. While teachers are aware of this practice and strive to educate students on the risks, they do not have adequate resources to address the issue.

B. Objectives

This research aims at exploring views and attitudes on blade-carrying among adolescent boys and girls enrolled in primary schools, along with wider school communities. The main objective of the research is to identify levers of change to inform participatory messaging workshops where young participants design messages promoting weapon-free safe spaces.

Specific objectives include:

- Identify and analyze determining factors for blade-carrying in and outside of schools.
- Analyze risks and consequences linked with blade-carrying in schools.
- Tailor sensitization messages through participatory sessions in order to promote schools as weapon-free spaces.

C. Methodology

The research took place in June and October of 2024 in six schools from the Lake, Kanem and Barh El Ghazel provinces in Chad, in both urban and rural settings, where several focus groups gathered to discuss the topic. Open questions were designed to reveal attitudes related to knives in and around schools. Focus groups discussions were organized with different participants' profiles:

- Adolescent girls aged 10-14
- Adolescent boys aged 10-14
- Teachers
- Parents' associations
- Representatives from social centers working with youth
- Parents not affiliated with parents' associations

In addition to focus group discussions, key informant interviews were held with school delegations, local education administrators and faith leaders to collect and include their perspectives and cross-check certain observations.

D. Findings and action

□ Research findings

While this research shed light on the gendered determinants of blade-carrying, the topic of masculinities remains widely absent from the discourse around blades. Most of the interviewees consider the transition into adulthood rather than manhood. This does not mean gender norms are not at play in the behavior of carrying blades but rather that notions of virility and traditional masculinity are less salient in the discourse than initially surmised. On the contrary, gender norms on femininity were frequently invoked when discussing why women and girls were not carrying knives, with girls being seen as “non-aggressive beings”. It seems therefore that masculinity is a determining factor of public, ostentatious knife-carrying without emerging as such in public discourse.



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Adolescent boys begin carrying knives around **puberty and the age of 12**. While girls do not seem to carry knives, some of them do carry a makeshift blade made from the object they use to comb their hair. Numerous testimonies attest to this practice, either for defensive purposes or in cases of violent fights and attacks. Males seem to have the monopoly of ostentatious blade-carrying while girls carry makeshift blades as a concealed practice.

It is important to distinguish the « **utilitarian** » use of blades in rural areas from the « **social** » use in urban areas, keeping in mind that the same boy may adopt these two practices in various moments of his life. Except for a few traditional communities (e.g. a group of fathers

in Wadjigui), blade-carrying **does not begin with a ceremonial rite of passage** within families. Likewise, boys seem to acquire their first knives by their own means, oftentimes at the local market. Based on adults' negative reactions to the widespread practice of blade-carrying, it may be relevant to look into the gap between **normative discourse** and actual attitudes / feelings.

On blade-carrying in urban and social settings (as opposed to utilitarian uses in rural context), answers reveal a paradoxical attitude of **rejection / adoption, fear / feelings of safety, aggression / appeasement** that shows how the practice is enmeshed in socio-cultural norms, the security context and the evolving social relationships and lifestyles among youth.

The potential for violence and domination in interactions between girls and boys is briefly mentioned when discussing the practice of carrying knives. Respondents talk about boys carrying knives "as a preventative measure" during wedding ceremonies or when "boys start to hang out with girls" ¹. Groups confirm the existence of boys who do not carry knives: this opens up the possibility of conducting a doer / non-doer survey along the social and behavior change methodology.

□ **Messages to promote schools as weapon-free spaces**

Adolescent boys and girls were gathered a second time in October 2024 to collectively come up with messages targeting various audiences to promote the idea of safe, weapon-free spaces with a focus on schools. Here are a few examples of the suggested messages:

- **« We all need leisure and joy. Let's never carry weapons in sports centers and ceremony halls »**
- **« Knives do not show bravery or courage. They are objects of violence that harm human relations »**
- **« Carrying knives and other blades makes people aggressive and violent, let's avoid them »**

E. Conclusion

The messages elaborated participatively with the focus groups discussions will be disseminated throughout the schools of the project and used as advocacy materials for the wider Education sector in Chad.

Responses indicate that some boys and young men do not carry knives, opening the potential for a social and behavior change survey methodology focused on doers/non-doers. Finally, this first foray into models of masculinities provides an opportunity for HI to address harmful gender norms from a complementary perspective when combined with existing GBV activities.

¹ Individual interview with a representative from the Ministry of Education

This pilot research was conducted with very limited resources at a very small scale (six schools). The blueprint is available for larger-scale research to inform gender-sensitive AVR programming in other regions of the world. Furthermore, similar research on small arms and light weapons in contexts where traditional weapon-making and hunting are still widely practiced could be considered.



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