



Helping Displaced Children in Mali Learn, Thrive and Stay in School

Program Description

EMPOWER is a 4.5-year project (August 2022 – October 2026) funded by Global Affairs Canada.

Implemented by Right To Play in Mali, in partnership with local education authorities and community-based organizations (CBOs) in Mopti, Gao, and Bandiagara, EMPOWER is designed to improve equitable access to quality education for children aged 6–12, including those from host, refugee, and internally displaced communities.

Through play-based learning, EMPOWER helps children – especially girls and children with disabilities – develop literacy, confidence, and life skills in safe and inclusive learning environments.

At the same time, it strengthens collaboration between schools, internally displaced persons and women-led community-based organizations—helping to create supportive ecosystems for children.

Context

EMPOWER operates in the Gao and Mopti regions of Mali – areas profoundly affected by protracted insecurity, internal displacement, and limited access to basic services. Conflict and displacement have disrupted education for thousands of children, leaving many at risk of falling behind or dropping out of school altogether.

Deeply entrenched gender inequality further limits access to education, particularly for girls. Early and forced marriage, disproportionate household responsibilities, and lack of civil documentation remain key barriers to enrolment and retention.

Children with disabilities also face stigma, inaccessible learning environments, and limited access to adapted resources, further restricting their participation.

By aligning activities with Mali's education priorities and working closely with local authorities and community-based organizations, EMPOWER is helping build education and child protection systems that can continue supporting children beyond the life of the project.

Key Learnings

- 1 Strengthening local organisations is critical to sustaining project gains:** All CBOs currently rely fully on project funds. Building fundraising, budgeting, and networking skills – particularly in Gao – is essential before the project ends in 2026.
- 2 Play-based learning works – but needs embedding:** Play-based and inclusive teaching methods are widely seen as effective. However, uptake remains uneven due to overcrowded classrooms, limited materials, and the need for stronger contextual adaptation of materials.
- 3 Teacher turnover erodes gains:** Frequent teacher transfers mean training gains are regularly lost. Training multiple teachers per school and developing low-cost peer support tools (e.g. WhatsApp groups, short video guides) can help maintain momentum.
- 4 Government alignment strengthens sustainability:** Project activities planned alongside local education authorities and aligned with national priorities are more likely to endure beyond the project period.
- 5 Children with disabilities risk being left behind:** Children with disabilities show lower reading and life skills scores and participate less in reading clubs, sports, and peer support groups. Targeted strategies are needed to close this gap.
- 6 Children are finding their voice:** Qualitative data reveal that children have gained confidence – some are now speaking up in front of adults and peers to encourage schooling in their communities, demonstrating early signs of child-led advocacy.

Key Results

31%

Grade 4 reading proficiency more than doubled, increasing from 13% at baseline to 31% at midline. Among girls, gains were similarly strong. The proportion of children unable to read at all fell dramatically, from 71% to 17%.

2,500+

2,504 children aged 6–12 enrolled, exceeding targets for internally displaced children and those aged 6–9 years.

85%

85% of teachers, head teachers, and pedagogical advisors say lessons learned have shaped their educational practices.

Findings are drawn from the EMPOWER Midline Evaluation (August 2025), conducted by Right To Play's Global Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning team, and led by C.A.C International and McGill University.

Antou's Story

At just 12 years old, Antou faced the devastating prospect of being forced into marriage – an act that would have ended her childhood and her dreams. Like many girls affected by displacement in Mopti, she was also at risk of permanent exclusion from school due to a lack of documentation.

That changed when Mariam, the leader of the community-based organization (CBO) AKOS – supported by the EMPOWER project – stepped in. AKOS intervened to prevent the marriage, helped Antou's family obtain her birth certificate, and ensured she could continue her education at a temporary learning centre.

Today, Antou is thriving in school, excelling in her studies, and gaining the confidence and skills she needs for her future. Her story shows that when communities, CBOs, and projects work together, they can change the course of a child's life.

