

Chance to learn for refugee schoolgirl in Chad

Just across the border from the conflict-ravaged Sudanese region of Darfur, in the arid countryside of eastern Chad, wind and dust whip through an open-air class where groups of girls struggle to study. Scattered trees offer little shelter but, in spite of the difficult conditions, the children persevere with their lessons. They are among the tens of thousands of refugees from Darfur, and many have never been to school. For girls in particular, this is probably their first opportunity.

Fatna is a 14-year-old schoolgirl. "In Darfur we went to my mother's village which was very far from the nearest school, so after year two I had to drop out," says Fatna. "I hope I can stay in school. This would be advantageous to me. Once

I know how to read and write and everything, maybe I can become someone in a good position with a responsible job." Fatna and her family fled Darfur after an armed raid on their community in which her sister was killed. "She died in front of us," the teenager recalls. "We weren't even able to bury her. We had to run. We had to leave her there."

UNICEF has set up temporary schools at 12 camps for the Darfur refugee communities in Chad, supplying teaching equipment and materials and helping to train teachers. Lessons follow the Sudanese curriculum so that the children can continue their education when they return home. UNICEF is working to stress the importance of girls' education – and almost every child in the camps is

now enrolled in a school. Going to school offers children like Fatna a safe space to regain a sense of stability and normalcy. It also helps protect them from violence, abuse and exploitation.

Getting girls to school is a challenge because of discrimination and cultural traditions. They are expected to work in the home and look after other children, and are sometimes forced into early marriage. However, attitudes are changing. Fatna's father is now convinced of the benefits of sending his daughter to school. "It's important to educate girls," he says. "If the girl goes to school then she knows everything. Sometimes it's even good for the family. If a girl goes to school then she can aid her family."

