RAISING THEIR VOICES: ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN SOUTH SUDAN'S PROTRACTED CRISIS

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This policy brief summarises key findings and evidence on the sources of insecurity for adolescent girls in South Sudan, their deployment of positive and negative coping mechanisms and interaction with humanitarian assistance, drawing directly from recent research conducted by Plan International and Monash Gender, Peace and Security Centre.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. *Adolescent girls describe a continuum of violence, which has become normalised in both the home and community and leaves them with few safe spaces in which to retreat. It is crucial to recognise the multiple and overlapping sources of insecurity for adolescent girls in both the private and public realms and support violence prevention initiatives targeting the full spectrum of this continuum of violence.*

2. *Changing deeply entrenched attitudes, behaviours and practices around gender that often drive the gender-based violence and insecurity experienced by adolescent girls is a long-term endeavour, requiring a sustained and multi-pronged approach.*

3. *The layering of multiple crises requires an understanding of the exacerbating and intersectional effects that uniquely impact adolescent girls. For instance, there are clear connections between food insecurity, child early and forced marriage (CEFM) and disruptions to the right to education. These patterns need to be identified and understood in programmatic responses.*

4. *Adolescent girls make a significant contribution to the maintenance and functioning of their communities through unpaid economic and care labour. This substantially impacts their education and life journeys. Efforts to build the resilience of communities to deal with additional shocks in protracted crises, such as the economic crisis that hit South Sudan, must recognise this and work to mitigate the continued degradation of adolescent girls' time, labour and safety.*

5. *There are substantial restrictions on the agency and capacity of adolescent girls, this should be addressed through targeted programmes that support leadership skills development for adolescent girls, in conjunction with initiatives that build both family and community support for autonomous decision making by adolescent girls.*

6. *Adolescent girls have developed coping mechanisms, strategies and capacities that can positively shape their own security and contribute to their communities. It is therefore clear from the findings presented in this report that while adolescent girls have immense vulnerabilities in many areas of their lives, they also are – and will continue to be – significant agents in the everyday survival of their communities. Therefore, in addition to addressing their vulnerabilities, acknowledging and supporting their resilience will provide an important path out of the current crisis.*

INTRODUCTION

Now half a decade long, the conflict in South Sudan has placed seven million people in need of humanitarian assistance.[1] In 2017, there were sporadic increases in armed conflict. As a result of the ongoing violence, one in three South Sudanese experience internal or external displacement. Levels of displacement reached four million in 2017 with 2.4 million of those displaced under the age of 18.[2] In turn, conflict and displacement have generated a food crisis which will continue to worsen throughout 2018. In February, the UN declared that 5.1 million people were severely food insecure, equating to almost half of the population.[3]

The compounding effects of this protracted crisis has caused widespread devastation upon South Sudan's civilians. However, while civilians face multiple forms of insecurity, adolescent girls are impacted in ways that are different from adolescent boys, men and women, and are often overlooked.

Drawing on research recently conducted by Plan International and Monash Gender, Peace and Security Centre this policy brief addresses the unique impact of this emergency on adolescent girls aged 10-19. It seeks to amplify their voices and perceptions of the crisis and presents their views on how the humanitarian sector might respond. However, it demonstrates that while adolescent girls are uniquely vulnerable in this crisis, they are also important actors in their communities' capacity to cope with the crisis. In short, this brief highlights that stronger and more sustained humanitarian interventions are urgently required, and must include the needs and views of adolescent girls.

EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE

> "[R]APE IS an issue in the community [as] a result of conflict."
>
> Adolescent girl, 15-19 years,
> Torit, South Sudan

Adolescent girls report that the threat of **physical violence** is their main source of insecurity. This is unsurprising as the conflict in South Sudan has been characterised by rampant violence, including extreme levels of violence against women and girls. Adolescent girls describe a continuum of violence, which has become normalised in both the home and community and leaves them with few safe spaces in which to retreat.

The threat of **gender-based violence** (GBV) is of greatest concern to adolescent girls. Individual, interpersonal, communal and societal factors combine to compound and exacerbate their vulnerabilities.

Extreme gender inequality and entrenched cultural practices underpin this violence which is heightened by conflict, displacement, the rise of violent crime, and economic and food insecurity.

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is by far the most common form of GBV that respondents to the research cite. An estimated 52% of girls in South Sudan are married prior to their 18th birthday.[4] Adolescent girls and community members highlight that girls are often viewed as an asset or potential source of income and believe their worth in marriage forms a default safety net for their families.

One community member in Juba remarked "with this current situation some parents take their girls as assets, which are sold expensively, so in most cases most parents sell off their daughters for money." In Nimule, the economic crisis is compounded by ongoing fighting and insecurity: "Due to the conflict, most of the parents are forcing their girls to get married so that they can get money to survive in this current situation," remarked one community member.

Intersecting drivers of CEFM include ingrained harmful practices, such as the payment of a bride price and the practice of polygamy, the marriage prospects of their brothers, family separation and the loss of parents, and the lack of educational and livelihood opportunities.

In some instances, girls actively seek to exercise their agency, although limited, to mitigate this risk through engaging in small scale livelihood activities or showing their value through educational performance and household labour.

> "MY FRIEND from here was taken back to Sudan and gotten married to a man with two wives because of money and they did it in silence."
>
> Adolescent girl, 16 years, Nyumanz, Uganda

Abduction and conflict-related sexual violence are highlighted by both adolescent girls themselves and community members as an ongoing threat to adolescent girls. In particular, many respondents note the sense of insecurity they feel around soldiers or those in uniform. In addition, adolescent girls identify the breakdown of the rule of law, scarcity of resources, the normalisation of violence and the degradation of protective mechanisms (such as the presence of parents and attendance at school) as contributing to their vulnerability. 13% of those surveyed state that they had been **abducted** at some point during the conflict.

Location remains a significant indicator across all forms of conflict-related violence and physical insecurity. Adolescent girls overwhelmingly report being safer in Uganda as opposed to South Sudan. Across the sites in South Sudan there was particular concern about the high number of soldiers roaming the streets and the presence of active gun-fighting and violence.

> **SOUTH SUDAN**
> "[I] DO not feel safe walking around during the day because girls often become victims of rape in the area."
>
> Adolescent girl, 15-19 years, Nimule
>
> ....
>
> **UGANDA**
> SINCE ARRIVING in Uganda, I:
> • "no longer hear gun shots"
> • "feel safe going to school and walking to the borehole with friends"
> • "think this community is peaceful"
>
> Adolescent girls, focus group discussion, Bidi Bidi

Adolescent girls report a widespread awareness of other girls who have experienced **family violence**. Girls report being more likely to experience family violence when their parents are absent and report experiencing violence at the hands of extended (as opposed to immediate) family. The absence of their father from the home creates a number of vulnerabilities in addition to physical violence. This includes loss of income, less capacity to access resources such as humanitarian aid, and loss of familial property due to inheritance issues.

> "[M]ANY GIRLS have become orphans and are forced to live with relatives who, in most cases, mistreat them – others get trapped into joining bad groups."
>
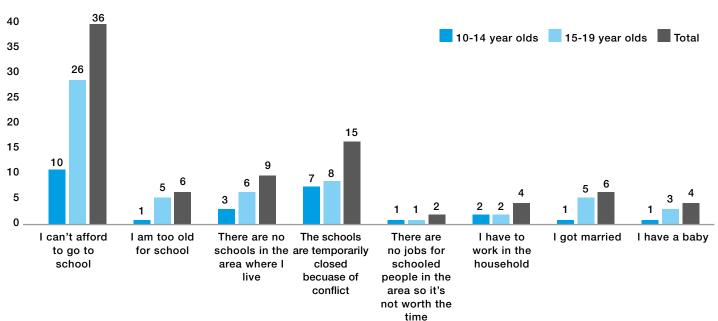> Local leader, Juba, South Sudan

FAMILY SEPARATION
Adolescent girls note that orphans and those separated from their parents' experience insecurity on a number of fronts: they are less likely to attend school due to cost, they feel more vulnerable to violence, neglect, and overwork at the hands of extended family or guardians and were more likely to report adverse health issues.

EDUCATION
Access to education in South Sudan has been significantly impacted by conflict. The main barrier to accessing education reported by adolescent girls is the cost of school fees and associated expenses (books, materials, uniforms, etc.). However, a number of factors impede girls' access to education (see Figure 1). Many adolescent girls report schools in their area being destroyed or closed as a result of the ongoing violence. Teachers, particularly in rural areas, have been displaced due to the conflict causing a shortage of qualified teachers.

Attitudes of parents surveyed are predominantly favorable towards girls' education with 87% of parents agreeing or

FIGURE 1. FREQUENCY OF REASONS GIVEN FOR NON-ENROLMENT IN SCHOOL: SOUTH SUDAN (N=82)

Legend: 10-14 year olds | 15-19 year olds | Total

Reason	10-14 year olds	15-19 year olds	Total
I can't afford to go to school	10	26	36
I am too old for school	1	5	6
There are no schools in the area where I live	3	6	9
The schools are temporarily closed because of conflict	7	8	15
There are no jobs for schooled people in the area so it's not worth the time	1	1	2
I have to work in the household	2	2	4
I got married	1	5	6
I have a baby	1	3	4

strongly agreeing that a girl should have the same chance to go to school as a boy. However, this is not reflected in the rates of school attendance. Only 16% of females over the age of 15 in South Sudan are able to read and write, and in 2013 just 730 girls were enrolled in their last year of high school (from a population of 12 million).[5] Whilst there is a dearth of data on the issue, anecdotal evidence shows that these barriers are substantially higher for adolescent girls with disabilities. The economic crisis has added further strain on access to education for adolescent girls.

ECONOMIC INSECURITY AND LIVELIHOODS

At home, adolescent girls report that their family's economic insecurity has a direct and negative impact upon many aspects of their lives. The responses from adolescent girls, as well as their parents and community members, clearly shows that as a group they are the last to access resources, yet they are often the first expected to provide them. They actively seek out food, firewood, and water for their families, often walking long distances and through insecure areas.

> "I GO to collect fire wood and sell them so I will get food due to the economic crisis"
>
> Adolescent girl, 10-14 years, Nimule, South Sudan

Adolescent girls describe a heavy burden of household labour, including cooking, cleaning, household management, caring for siblings, and being forced into marriages for which their families receive financial gain. Further, adolescent girls in South Sudan sometimes sacrifice their education to undertake this work or to contribute to the household earnings, usually through small livelihood initiatives.

FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

Reflecting this deteriorating situation across the country, food insecurity and a lack of equitable resources is a significant concern for adolescent girls. Only 24% of survey respondents always have enough to eat. Efforts to mitigate these food insecurities vary (see Figure 2). In Uganda adolescent girls spoke of borrowing from extended family and neighbours while in South Sudan they highlighted their engagement in small business activities. Some respondents also mentioned that they knew of some adolescent girls who trade sex for food and money as a means of survival.
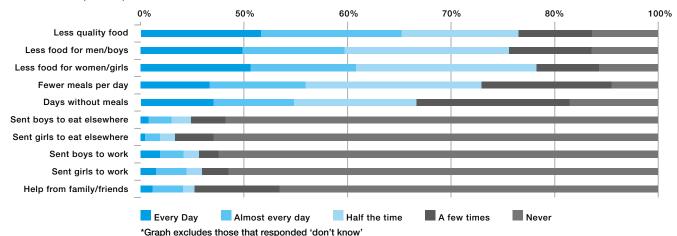
HEALTHCARE

There are many barriers to accessing healthcare for adolescent girls. The Ministry of Health estimate that almost half of the country's medical facilities have been destroyed, with looting of equipment and medicines being a major problem.[6] Furthermore, economic insecurity creates an inability to afford both medical consultation and medical treatment.

Mental health is a significant concern for adolescent girls, with many speaking of the lasting impact that witnessing and experiencing violence has had on them. Of those surveyed, 75% stated that the conflict has had a negative effect on their state of mind, and in Lainya this figure rose to 94%.

> IN THE last 12 months, 26% of adolescent girls surveyed stated that they had thought at least once about ending their own life.

On the whole, adolescent girls show a lack of knowledge on **sexual and reproductive health** (SRH) but express

FIGURE 2. HOUSEHOLD COPING STRATEGIES AND FREQUENCY APPLIED IN RESPONSE TO FOOD INSECURITY (N=249)*

Legend: Every Day, Almost every day, Half the time, A few times, Never

*Graph excludes those that responded 'don't know'

an interest and desire for information and accessible SRH services. Whilst the maternal mortality rate in South Sudan is one of the highest in the world, there is a dearth of data on adolescent maternal mortality and maternal morbidity rates. It is clear, however, that early pregnancy is a significant concern and brings with it extreme health risks for adolescent girls. There is also a clear link between early pregnancy and access to education. Of those surveyed, 85% of girls who had ever been pregnant were not enrolled in school.

SITES OF RESILIENCE

As evidenced above, adolescent girls who have been displaced by the current crisis in South Sudan are experiencing – and are vulnerable to – complex and intersecting forms of insecurity.

However, in designing responses to the current crisis it is also important to acknowledge the resilience adolescent girls show through their own survival and through their responses to the issues facing them. Adolescent girls have adopted a range of positive and negative coping mechanisms that facilitate their navigation through the crisis. The positive coping mechanisms include relying upon familial relationships, building peer networks and identifying mentors.

Family: The immediate family is the most significant site of support for adolescent girls. Adolescent girls cope with the burdens, challenges and insecurities they face by turning to their parents, particularly their mothers. However, it is important to note that adolescent girls also identified the family as being – sometimes simultaneously – a threat to their physical and emotional safety.

Community and Extended Family: Adolescent girls spoke widely about having open and supportive relationships with their mothers, but many also mentioned female school teachers as being an important source of emotional support and advice. Orphaned or unaccompanied adolescent girls turn to extended family for support. In such cases, adolescent girls report relying upon extended family for food, shelter and financial support but rarely spoke of extended family as providing emotional support. A few adolescent girls note the role that spirituality and the church plays as a coping mechanism and supportive community for them.

Peer Networks: In some cases, adolescent girls turn to their peer group for support. In this sense, the capacity to attend school is a significant coping mechanism for adolescent girls as it can provide a safe space to develop non-familial relationships. Adolescent girls report relying upon peer networks for emotional support, knowledge exchange and the sharing of resources. For instance, adolescent girls say that their primary source of SRHR education comes from other girls at school. Some adolescent girls note that they share clothes and pens to support their peer group to attend

school. Others stated that they share class notes with those girls unable to attend school.

There is also clearly an appetite amongst adolescent girls for wider and more formally mediated peer networks and safe spaces. It is frequently reported that adolescent girls deal with abuse and issues facing them by remaining silent. Many reported that they would "feel better" if they had a community with whom they could share relatable experiences, receive advice, and share knowledge on socially marginalised or specific issues such as SRHR or menstrual hygiene management.

> "[G]IRLS ARE not supposed to talk in front of elders – some of their issues never get addressed because of this, stopping them from participating in the community in the way boys can."
>
> NGO member, Juba, South Sudan

Finally, it is worth noting that **for some adolescent girls, optimism appears to be a positive coping mechanism**. Whilst both adolescent girls and adult respondents to the research were broadly pessimistic about their future, approximately 40% of the adolescent girls who took part in the focus group discussions communicated their hope for a better and more secure future. While conscious of the limitations of their context, some adolescent girls have great ambitions. A focus group discussion of girls aged 15-19 in Rhino Camp (Uganda) elicited a number of responses when asked about how they see their future: two hope to become nurses, one wants to be an accountant, others indicate that they wanted to be a pastor, a pilot, a policewoman, a doctor and five indicated that they wanted to become teachers. Such optimism in the face of current challenges is a characteristic that is often associated with adolescence and demonstrates a source of resilience that is less evident in adult populations.

> "…[I] WANT to become a doctor and achieve a better future once [I] turn 18."
> Adolescent girl, 10-14 years, Lainya, South Sudan
>
> "[I'm] optimistic about getting good jobs and eventually being able to help others because of the education [I'm] getting."
> Adolescent girl, 15-19 years, Juba, South Sudan

> "THE FUTURE will be good, because that time we will be in university. We will have a good job in the future"
>
> Adolescent girl, 10-14 years, Juba, South Sudan
>
> ....
>
> "I WILL create peace in South Sudan. I will become a good professional. I will develop the nation."
>
> Adolescent girl, 15-19 years, Yei, South Sudan

Adolescent girls also identified a number of negative coping mechanisms that they voluntarily adopted or had imposed upon them. As discussed throughout the report, these include CEFM, increased engagement in paid and unpaid labour and leaving school.

Despite the adverse circumstances they are living under, adolescent girls demonstrate resourcefulness, imagination, leadership, compassion, sacrifice, consideration of others, skills development and resilience. These are qualities that their community will need as it seeks to map a path out of crisis.

By recognising and acknowledging these qualities, we provide potential entry points for the sector to partner with adolescent girls and, together, contribute to efforts to address their core concerns. Such a partnership also allows the sector to build upon the existing (but often ignored) capacity of adolescent girls in order, not just to protect them, but to promote, support and sustain their contributions to recovery and community building.

GAPS IN THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Overall this research shows adolescent girls are not consulted by the humanitarian community and not engaged in the design and decision-making of interventions in their communities. This was true even for interventions specifically aimed at either women and girls or with components focused on adolescent girls specifically.

Whilst they had not to date been consulted, many adolescent girls articulated activities that they believe would benefit them in their communities. Payment of school fees, livelihood initiatives and food distribution topped the list. They also indicated a desire for drama clubs, leadership initiatives, programs to develop skills, including to make re-useable sanitary items and sports activities such as netball and soccer.

CONCLUSION

The lives of South Sudanese girls continue to be profoundly shaped by the protracted nature of the emergency. This, in turn, will shape the adults they become and the capacities they have to support their nation into a sustainable post-emergency phase.

It is clear from the research presented here that while adolescent girls have immense vulnerabilities in many areas of their lives, they also are – and will continue to be – significant agents in the everyday survival of their communities. Therefore, in addition to addressing their vulnerabilities, acknowledging and supporting their capacity for resilience provides the foundation for sustainable peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Adolescent girls have adopted a range of both positive and negative coping mechanisms to facilitate their navigation through the emergency. These mechanisms demonstrate their (albeit at times limited) capacity for shaping their worlds and those of their families and communities. While they share the desperate humanitarian needs of the population as a whole – in terms of physical violence, food insecurity, and displacement – there are a number of areas where they request unique interventions.

UNDERSTANDING THE capacities and needs of adolescent girls provides potential entry points for the humanitarian sector to partner with adolescent girls in addressing their core concerns. It will be critical that in the earliest days of an emergency, humanitarian agencies collect information on this group. It allows the sector to build upon the existing (but often ignored) strengths, knowledge and skills of adolescent girls to not just protect them, but to promote, support and sustain their contributions to disaster preparedness, emergency recovery and community building.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALL

- Invest in and deliver specific programmes targeting the unique needs of adolescent girls;
- Fund and deliver age sensitive longer-term programming that addresses harmful practices and seeks to positively shape gender equality in humanitarian settings;
- Support initiatives that build family and community support for autonomous decision-making for adolescent girls;
- Promote the recognition of adolescent girls' rights and support attitudinal and behaviour change where girls' rights are devalued;
- Build leadership skills to support adolescent girls' enhanced participation in decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- Allow adolescent girls to shape programme design and implementation processes, including ensuring accountability mechanisms are accessible to adolescent girls;
- Ensure humanitarian interventions set clear targets and include specific indicators in programme monitoring and evaluation frameworks that assess the outcome of the programme for adolescent girls;
- Ensure that adolescent mothers and married adolescents are included in adolescent-targeted initiatives and general programming;
- Conduct gender analysis for all areas of programming that incorporates differentials for adolescent girls and listens to the voices and perspectives of adolescent girls;
- Ensure education interventions incorporate and address the barriers for girls' participation. These include systemic barriers such as quality of education and the burden of household labour as well as practical barriers such as a lack of appropriate sanitation facilities and the financial cost of school fees and materials.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS AND POLICY MAKERS

This brief recommends that donors give greater consideration to the unique experiences of adolescent girls in the design of their humanitarian policies and commitments. This would require a commitment to:

- Prioritise funding for specialised protection programmes for adolescent girls that include access to age-appropriate safe spaces;
- Prioritise funding for initiatives that address the multiple and overlapping drivers of CEFM. These should address the immediate drivers of CEFM and put in place longer term prevention and mitigation measures;
- Prioritise funding for programmes that address the barriers to education including high school fees, the lack of school resources (books, pens, etc.), teacher recruitment and training and the protection of school buildings and infrastructure;
- Prioritise funding for the provision of adolescent girl-friendly information and services, particularly around SRHR;
- Set targets for humanitarian and development funding in regards to the inclusion of adolescent girls in all humanitarian activity;
- Incorporate mechanisms across all investments to assess and understand the impact on adolescent girls.

ENDNOTES

1 Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2018, "South Sudan, November 2017", p. 1, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/South_Sudan_2018_Humanitarian_Needs_Overview.pdf

2 UNICEF Briefing Note, "South Sudan: The impact of the crisis on children," Dec 2017, p.6, https://www.unicef.org/southsudan/UNICEF_South_Sudan_Report_Childhood_under_Attack_15Dec_FINAL.pdf

3 Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock, "Remarks at the launch of the 2018 South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan and 2018 South Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan".

4 UNICEF State of the World's Children (New York: UNICEF, 2016).

5 Ibid.

6 Médecins Sans Frontier, "South Sudan: Violence Against Healthcare," 17 June 2014, https://msf.lu/sites/default/files/msf-south_sudan_conflict-violence_against_healthcare.pdf

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Monash Gender, Peace and Security is a group of policy and community engaged scholars whose research is focused in the field of gender, peace and security. We seek to use our research to inform scholarly debate, policy development and implementation, public understanding about the gendered politics of armed conflict and the search for peace.

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