



ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN CRISIS: VOICES FROM SOUTH SUDAN

Summary Report



In the last five years the conflict in South Sudan has displaced four million people and placed seven million in need of humanitarian assistance¹. Everyone concerned has had their lives torn apart: none more than adolescent girls. Their physical safety, their health and their future prospects are all threatened in ways that differ from the risks faced by adolescent boys and adult women. Often, too, just because they are young and female, their rights and needs are ignored.

This report commissioned by Plan International² draws on research conducted with girls and members of their families and communities in multiple sites in South Sudan and Uganda. It explores how adolescent girls within two age brackets (aged 10-14 and 15-19) understand and respond to the unique impact their country's crisis has upon them. It seeks to amplify their voices and their perceptions of the crisis, and presents their views on how the humanitarian sector might respond.



"I will create peace in South Sudan. I will become a good professional. I will develop the nation."

GIRL, 15-19, YEI

WHAT DID THE GIRLS TELL US?

GIRLS ARE FRIGHTENED: not only of armed men in the streets, but of gender-based violence which happens within families, including child, early and forced marriage which puts their health, their education and general well-being at risk.

"In the community soldiers are threatening to rape girls, forcing girls to marry them."

GIRL, 15-19, NIMULE

THEY ARE HUNGRY: 77 per cent report that they do not have enough to eat. This affects their health and has an impact on their ability to concentrate at school.

"Yes, sometimes we have to go to sleep hungry. To cope when there is not enough I am doing small business in order to get money for buying food."

GIRL, 15-19, YEI

THEY HAVE TOO MUCH TO DO: girls do extra work looking after brothers and sisters, and doing general household chores as well as attempting to earn money in whatever small way they can. This is time not spent at school and will have a massive impact on their future lives.

"I worry the most about not having enough time to revise because I have too much work to do at home and may end up failing my exams."

GIRL, 17, BARATUKA

1. Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). 2018. "Humanitarian Needs Overview: South Sudan." Pp. 2-4. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/South_Sudan_2018_Humanitarian_Needs_Overview.pdf

2. Girls in Protracted Crises in South Sudan online ref

THERE IS LITTLE OR NO HEALTHCARE: much of the health infrastructure has been destroyed, and the costs of medicine and treatment are prohibitive. Girls' access to sexual and reproductive health information and treatment is severely curtailed - again with enormous ramifications for their future lives. Despite the need, there is also little or no professional support for mental health issues:

"The war has caused many girls to have problems with their emotional health ... many of them are victims of rape and suffer from constant depression, mental problems and trauma."

NGO WORKER, TORIT

26% OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS INTERVIEWED IN SOUTH SUDAN REPORTED HAVING CONSIDERED ENDING THEIR OWN LIVES AT LEAST ONCE IN THE LAST TWELVE MONTHS

Despite all this the research also bears witness to hope, determination and an impressive resilience. Adolescent girls identified several factors that are key to their survival and to their ability to support their families and communities. Most important among these are:

PARENTS: girls stress the importance of the presence of a mother and father. A united family is crucial both in terms of protection from violence, from poverty and hunger, and in terms of emotional well-being.

"[I] know of children who have been abused or mistreated recently: heavy work, defilement, denial of education ... many children are orphans with no one to take care of them."

GIRL, 16, NYUMANZI

EDUCATION: repeatedly, adolescent girls identify access to education as of major importance in their lives. Education protects their future, enhancing their independence and their job opportunities and it safeguards their present, enabling them to build networks outside the family and providing a barrier against forced marriage.

16% OF FEMALES OVER THE AGE OF 15 IN SOUTH SUDAN ARE ABLE TO READ AND WRITE.³

CONCLUSION

Despite the numbers of adolescent girls affected so profoundly by the ongoing crisis in South Sudan, they are seldom consulted about their own experiences and needs. It is rare that either their own communities or the humanitarian sector at large pay much attention to them. This research is an attempt to rectify that: to acknowledge that girls and young women do have rights, and that their ideas about, and reflections upon, the situation they are in are worth listening to and acting upon.

We know that girls have asked for protection, physically, emotionally and in terms of safeguarding their future; they emphasise the importance of education and are determined to contribute to rebuilding, not only their own lives, but their communities and nation.

The recommendations that follow are based upon their priorities.

VOICES FROM SOUTH SUDAN: THE GIRLS' RECOMMENDATIONS

- Listen to girls at home and in their communities: create forums and processes that involve adolescent girls in programme planning and community decision making.
- Ensure that girls' education does not suffer. This means addressing all the barriers that get in the way of girls' participation:
 - systemic barriers such as quality of education and the burden of household labour
 - practical barriers such as a lack of appropriate sanitation facilities and the financial cost of school fees and materials.
- Prioritise funding for the provision of adolescent girl-friendly information and services, particularly around mental health issues and sexual and reproductive health rights.
- Tackle gender based violence in all its forms particularly by providing safe spaces for girls and promoting attitudinal and behavioural change at both family and community level.

3. Watkins, Kevin. 2016. "State of the World's Children: A fair chance for every child." UNICEF.



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About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

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