

CHILD MARRIAGE AND HUNGER CRISIS

South Sudan's hunger crisis is leaving girls at greater risk of early marriage. This publication seeks to understand the drivers of early marriage and highlight solutions to address it

SOUTH SUDAN

CASE STUDY 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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UNDERSTANDING THE SCALE OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN SOUTH SUDAN



CHILD MARRIAGE:
52%
Married before the age of **18**



EARLY PREGNANCY:

28%
Motherhood before the age of 18



2.1 MILLION
GIRLS IN NEED
7.24 million people facing acute food shortages



YOUTH POPULATION:

57%
of South Sudan's people are below the age of 18



DISPLACED PEOPLE:
1.6 MILLION
internally displaced people in South Sudan

310K refugees and asylum seekers from other countries in South Sudan



CHILD PROTECTION:
2.3 MILLION
children at risk of violence, exploitation, abuse & neglect

25% 

Percentage of girls who attend secondary school:
Number of children out of school: **2.4 million**

19% of females ages **15+** are literate

Data sources:

3. UNICEF. (2019). Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. <https://data.unicef.org/country/ssd>

UN OCHA. (2020, December). Humanitarian needs overview: South Sudan https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/south_sudan_2021_humanitarian_needs_overview.pdf

SOUTH SUDANESE GIRLS FORCED INTO EARLY MARRIAGES TO MEET THEIR FAMILY'S NEEDS



Fifteen-year-old Adut was forced into an early marriage at age 13 for the bride price of 15 cows.

"I was in primary seven when my parents forced me to marry," says 15-year-old Adut, a mother of one.

At the age of 13, Adut was forced to marry a 42-year-old man and drop out of school.

Conflict forced Adut and her family to flee their village and seek shelter at an Internally Displaced Persons camp in Tonj South where she lives now.

"We fled and sought refuge here since what we called home was destroyed and in ruins," she says.

She says that before conflict interrupted her family's life they were not very poor and could afford two meals a day. Once they were displaced and their means of earning an income was destroyed, life became too hard.

Adut's parents saw their daughter as their only opportunity to survive.

"My family was given 15 cows as my bride price," she sadly reports. "I had to drop out of school, manage a family and separate from my parents."

Sadly, Adut's situation is not unique. Nearly half of all girls in South Sudan marry before the age of 18.

A 2013 report from Human Rights Watch¹ highlights that dowry often leads families to force their girls to marry as early as possible, often after first menstruation. In South Sudan, dowry is paid by the groom and his family and can include cattle, money and other gifts.

After marriage, Adut's life revolved around assisting her husband sell charcoal, which is his only source of income.

"Sometimes we sleep hungry due to a lack of food if no one bought charcoal from us. I also

sell charcoal at home or collect firewood from the forest to supplement my husband's earning." They do not have a support system and Adut says she did not benefit from the bride price.

"My mother feels embarrassed because of the situation I am in right now and has never visited me. I did not benefit from the cows given to my family and do not have anything to feed on."

According to 2020 research published in the *Journal of Black Studies*² about early marriage in South Sudan, traditional gender norms in South Sudan mean that girls have little decision-making power, with parents and male siblings instead responsible for making decisions on their behalf, "including getting them married without their consent" writes the research study's author Kon M. Madut.

“ I regret this marriage but had no option

¹ Human Rights Watch. (2013). "This Old Man Can Feed Us. You Will Marry Him": Child and Forced Marriage in South Sudan. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/southSudan0313_forinsertWebVersion_0.pdf

² K.M. Madut. (2020). Determinants of early marriage and construction of gender roles in South Sudan. *Journal of Black Studies*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244020922974>

"I regret this marriage but had no option," Adut says. "If I get money, I want to go back to school and fulfil my dream of becoming a doctor." She says that before her husband started the charcoal business, he was working as a shop attendant but when a few things went missing, he was imprisoned for a week before he was released.

"We would cry with my daughter Ajak Manut and sleep uneasily. I was always scared at night because I had not slept alone," she says.

World Vision, with support from United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, funds the South Sudan Humanitarian Project in Tonj South. The goal of this humanitarian project is to respond through multi-sectoral interventions to crisis-

affected population in greater Tonj. Affected sectors include health, nutrition, food security and livelihood as well as protection addressing issues such as child marriage/ forced marriage.

Joseph Deng, a World Vision project manager says, "The project has a component of community awareness on early child marriage, child rights abuse, Gender Based Violence and peace building. These activities will have positive impacts in terms of changing the mindset of the community on the issues mentioned. This is the only way we can change and educate our community about negative and unproductive behaviors."

Adut is not her real name



DISPLACEMENT INCREASES VULNERABILITY



Betty and her family are facing a dire hunger crisis.

"For three months, from December 2020 to March 2021, we suffered from hunger as food distribution stopped. We survived but within that period I became very emaciated and weak," says the 20-year-old pregnant woman.

Betty is one of South Sudan's 1.6 million internally displaced people. Betty is originally from Baliet County of Upper Nile State but conflict forced her family to resettle in Dingthoma, an Internally Displaced Persons camp, in Melut in 2014.

A 2020 UNICEF report³ states that displaced girls are at higher risk of early marriage and sexual gender-based violence, and when food insecurity occurs girls' vulnerability increases .

World Vision supports girls and women in Melut.

"The daily psychosocial support and counselling by World Vision team do help, but we need food too. I cry out to the world to help us," Betty says.

“ I became very emaciated and weak



Data sources:

3. UNICEF (2020) Lost at home: The risks and challenges for internally displaced children and the urgent actions needed to protect them.

ESTABLISHING THE LINK BETWEEN TEENAGE PREGNANCY AND EARLY MARRIAGE



At 18, Aniri Moses is a mother of two and in her fourth year of marriage.

"My husband was 21 when we met, and he was in nursing school. I could not resist getting intimate with him because he supported me with my school needs more than my family did," says Aniri, who lives in Kpirabe village, Yambio County.

"In just three months, I was pregnant," Aniri says.

She was 14.
Yet, Aniri is hardly alone.

South Sudan has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the world, with a third of South Sudanese girls starting childbearing at ages 15-19 years, a report in the South Sudan Medical Journal stated⁴. The factors contributing to teenage pregnancy include a lack of school fees, a lack of parental care, poverty, peer pressure, non-use of contraceptives, and low educational level, the same report found.

For Aniri, pregnancy drove her father's decision to consent to her marriage, along with the promise of a dowry.

"My father gladly gave me out in marriage. He got half of what he wanted, SSP 50,000 [\$383 USD] out of the SSP 100,000 [\$768 USD] he

demanded from my husband's people." Pregnancy for Aniri was difficult. She admits to being "stressed and sick with malaria" and "wondered if I was going to die during delivery."

Susan Baito, a midwife in Yambio State Hospital provides broader insight about maternal health for young women: "Most of these girls face difficulties during delivery or even lose their lives because their pelvis is contracted or not well developed hence it often ends in Caesarean section."

"The girls who don't attend maternity have no idea of maternal health services," Susan says. "Advised by traditional birth attendants, they push their babies before the actual labor time which results in the swelling of the vulva and the baby can die in the process. Many times some are rushed to the hospital unconscious."

South Sudan has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, with an estimated at 800 deaths per 100,000 live births⁵.

Susan further says that for teenage girls even a Caesarean section is dangerous because without proper care they can develop a wound infection.

Early this year, World Vision, with support from Health Pooled Fund (HPF) identified and

trained 450 vulnerable adolescents and young mothers including 14 girls with disabilities, on Adolescence Sexual Reproductive Health Rights. The intervention helped girls make informed decisions about their reproductive rights.

Aniri is one of the young women who belong to the group who took part in awareness campaigns in Yambio about reproductive health. When she gave birth to her second child, Aniri says was able to reach the hospital and get the help she needed, without too much stress.

Aniri's group meets every Friday.

"Now I am more aware of reproductive and maternal health services needed to keep the girls and their babies during pregnancy and at birth safe," Aniri says.

Stephen Leonard, the HPF project manager, shares that the information about reproductive health is being spread through the initiative, as participants in the initial training act as peer educators who "go further to convey the messages to other girls within their various communities."

“Pregnancy drove her father’s decision to consent to her marriage, along with the promise of a dowry.

⁴ Vincent, G., & Alemu, F. M. (2016). Factors contributing to, and effects of, teenage pregnancy in Juba. *South Sudan Medical Journal*, 9(2), 28-31. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ssmj/article/view/137169>

⁵ Tongun, J. B., Mukunya, D., Tylleskar, T., Sebit, M. B., Tumwine, J. K., & Ndeezi, G. (2019). Determinants of health facility utilization at birth in South Sudan. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(13), 2445. <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/16/13/2445>

FORCED TO MARRY AT THE AGE OF 12



youngest son, I ran away," she adds.

"I walked for over 170 km, from where I lived with my uncle, all the way to Juba without water or food, but only by God's grace," she recalls.

Sunday's husband followed her to Juba to bring her back to their home. Her uncle had refused to return the cows (dowry) and, according to local chiefs, she was the property of her husband.

"When I was taken to the local courts, the chiefs ruled in favour of my husband simply because he paid the dowry and it was final," she says.

Desperate not to go back to her forced marriage and her husband's various sons, Sunday attempted suicide.

Sunday was not aware of South Sudan's statutory court system, the Constitution, and other enabling laws that protect the rights of children and women. A neighbour shared her story with a World Vision staff member, who then reported to the protection team.

Sunday received psychosocial support and legal advice. A World Vision legal officer connected her to a practicing advocate for a civil suit. She was successful and a divorce was granted. The court directed her ex-husband to recover his cattle from her uncle.

"World Vision helped me access the justice system and get justice on what was done to me. The true meaning of justice and equality before the law is my freedom from the old man," Sunday shares.

"The court says 'I have a right to be free and no law can force me to stay in a marriage that is neither happy nor respects my dignity,'" she adds.

With a big smile, she expresses that she is no longer in misery: "I urge parents to stop forcing their girls to marry in exchange for cows, the pain in forced marriage is worse than death," she appeals.

World Vision's Legal Officer, Elijah Mayual Mangar says, "Seeing someone so disillusioned to the extent of attempting to claim her own life is heart-breaking."

"To see her smiling again after World Vision's intervention is a great restoration of hope and trust in the work we do and South Sudan's justice system, despite the existence of ongoing challenges," Mayual concludes.

Not her real name

“**When I was taken to the local courts, the chiefs ruled in favour of my husband simply because he paid the dowry**”

"My uncle forced me to marry a 50-year-old man at the age of 12, for the price of 20 cows. I pleaded with him not to, but he did not care about what was going to happen to me," shares Sunday*, now 20-years-old.

After she was married, she was unable to conceive.

In her five years of marriage, her husband and his four sons abused her just to get her pregnant.

"When he was not successful, the guy handed me over to his eldest son. He later passed me on to the next one, and again to another," she remembers.

"I was exhausted but could not go back to my uncle because he would just bring me back to my husband. So, in 2015, when he gave me to his



Sunday, 18, was forced to get married at age 12 by her uncle for the bride price of 20 cows. World Vision supported Sunday to get a divorce in 2020 from the High Court.

BICYCLES, AWARENESS BRINGING YOUNG MOTHERS BACK TO SCHOOL



Grace, the chairperson of Bright Future Girls, points out that, "The bicycles have allowed us to reach remote communities to raise awareness on many issues. Before, we would walk for hours, sometimes in bad weather; and could only cover distances close to home. The bicycles allow us to go much further."

support the young mothers to trust and believe in themselves despite what the community label them. This should not stop them from learning."

The Bike for Girls project is showing remarkable results.

"With the continuous campaign, the enrolment of girls has increased in our school from 379 to 782. This gives me hope because it shows how our efforts can influence the communities. This is just for four months. Imagine how many girls we can protect and bring to school in two years or more," Grace says.

Malish Clement, a World Vision Protection Project Coordinator elaborates on the project, "World Vision conducts awareness raising through a door-to-door campaigns and discussions at the nutrition centers to help prevent exploitation of girls, women and all the children. Our team also does case management for those exposed to abuse."

"I believe one day a woman will lead South Sudan," says 14-year-old Grace. "We need to help to create awareness and improve the number of girls attending school!"

In late 2020, 300 girls received bicycles in Yambio County of South Sudan's Western Equatoria State, a part of the Bike for Girls Project.

The initiative encouraged girls to go to school and boosted their efforts to raise awareness with other children and parents on issues that included gender-based violence, child marriage and the importance of education.

"For us to see a better South Sudan, we need to go to school because education is the only way to develop our country. We have to support other girls. Seeing a teenager carrying a child is so painful when they are supposed to be in school," Grace shares.

Some of the girls who have dropped out of school are young mothers. They refused to return to their education because of the demeaning names the community often call them after having a child.

Grace and the members Bright Future Girls help young mothers build their self confidence. "We



World Vision supports 300 girls in Western Equatoria state with bicycles to raise awareness about gender based violence, child marriage and the importance of education.

CHILD PROTECTION COMMITTEE INTERVENES TO STOP CHILD MARRIAGE



Gogrial West County and each committee consists of nine members composed of the community leader, tribal chiefs, parents and teachers, women, youth, police officers and faith leaders. These committees have a positive influence in their respective communities.

“Child protection committees open people’s minds on child rights, awareness and prevention of abuse and gender-based violence in their respective localities since they were organized,” says James Ring Ring, World Vision’s Education and Protection Manager in Warrap State.

Now back in school and an advocate in her community, Aluel shares, “I talk to young girls as I share my story as an example and encourage them to study well to have a better future.”

“The government and organizations should work together and come up with an effective strategy to protect girls and boys from early marriage. With support, young mothers can also be sent back to school,” says Sultan Piendit.

“I faced a lot of pressure from relatives as well as my own family to forget education and get married,” 17-year old Aluel says.

determined to get her married as soon as the baby was born but a local child protection committee intervened.

At 15, she fell in love with a boy her own age, thinking it would save her from being married off to a much older man. She became pregnant and the boy denied being responsible.

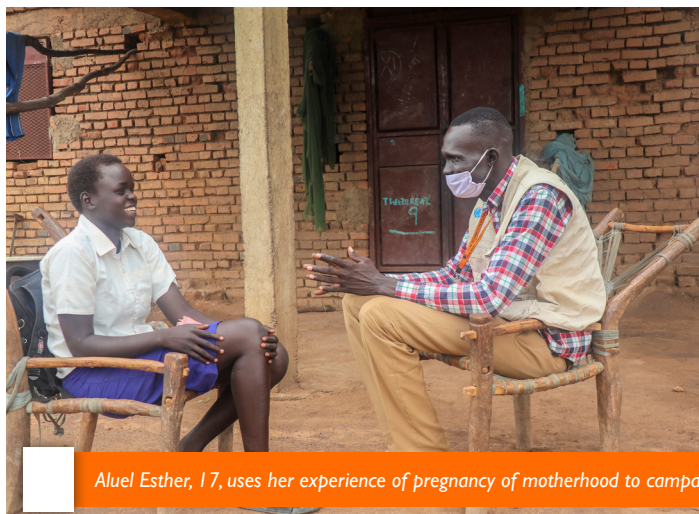
“We work tirelessly as part of the protection committee to make sure that girls like Aluel are encouraged to go back to school after dropping out and their parents are cautioned against forcing their children into early child marriage,” says village Chief Sultan Piendit, the chairman of community-based child protection committee in Aluel’s community of Gogrial West.

She says, “A majority of girls in my community did not complete Primary five because of the pressure and encouragement from relatives to marry early.”

“A majority of girls in my community did not complete Primary five because of the pressure and encouragement from relatives to marry early.”

According to Aluel, her father was enraged when he found out she was pregnant. He was

World Vision’s Child Protection Project in Warrap State supports nine committees in



Aluel Esther, 17, uses her experience of pregnancy of motherhood to campaign for girls to go to school and focus on their education





PROVIDING CHILDREN WITH INFORMATION ABOUT CHILD MARRIAGE AND THEIR RIGHTS

"Girls in my community are normally married off early," says 13-year-old Maria. "I witnessed another girl get married, and it broke me inside. I often wondered when my turn would come."

World Vision is addressing the issue. In Greater Tonj, World Vision has set up child-friendly spaces, an after-school program where children can play and learn in a safe, supervised environment, as part of a broader child protection project, under the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund.

At the Child Friendly Space, children are provided with information about their rights and how to prevent child marriage, along with other issues that confront children during crises.

"Now more than ever, I am fully aware of my rights as a girl and child. I also take time to educate my parents because making them know will stop them from marrying me off early," Maria says.

As of July 2021, the project had reached 10,104 individuals with psychological support and counselling.

Patricia Ajok of World Vision's protection staff in South Sudan says, "It's fulfilling to see girls open up freely on issues affecting them in their communities. Unlike before, girls experienced trauma and pain but kept silent for fear of being disowned by their families."

The project aims to reach 55,000 individuals.

"This project is doing great in the community by addressing many protection concerns," says Joseph Deng, World Vision's South Sudan Humanitarian Fund project manager. "However, the need to extend the same services to other Payams (municipalities) is still huge."

“ Now more than ever, I am fully aware of my rights as a girl and child



Maria and thousand other girls learn about their rights and find refuge in World Vision's Child Friendly Centres in Tonj South County, Warrap state.

MESSAGE FROM THE COUNTRY DIRECTOR

The laws are clear. No child should marry before the age of 18, not in South Sudan, not anywhere.

The reality is different. More than 50 per cent of South Sudan's young women are married before the age of 18.

With the exchange of vows, girls inadvertently commit to a lifetime of challenges. Child marriage has been documented to have adverse health, economic, and social consequences.

Girls' health is impacted by early sexual activity. Girls who marry before the age of 18 are less likely to use contraceptives and are at greater risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. The younger a girl is when she is pregnant, the greater risk she has of dying while giving birth or of having pregnancy or childbirth complications.

Girls' economic potential is thwarted too with child marriage. Too often marriage means the end of a girl's education, and with that, the opportunity to learn inside a classroom ends and future career opportunities are lost.

Girls' social and physical well-being is frequently impacted by child marriage. For many girls, gender-based violence becomes rooted in marriage. Marriage to a man significantly older causes a distinct power imbalance. Additionally, social isolation and lack of female autonomy prevents girls and women from getting the help they need to escape intimate partner violence.

While the reasons to end child marriage are many, it is like a weed with deep roots, gripped by poverty, traditional cultural values, gender norms, and a lack of resources to enforce the country's laws.

As the stories in this report reveal, families send their children into marriage before they are old enough to legally make a decision to wed for themselves. They believe it is a matter of survival.

The roots of poverty tighten when conflict, weather events, or health crises emerge. During the past three years in South Sudan, these occurrences have happened too frequently.

Continued violent fighting forced agricultural-based families to abandon their homes and the land they rely on for their food and income. The COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdowns has disrupted the vitality of small-scale businesses, as markets have been shut and regular income lost. Flooding has destroyed crops and left families without the sorghum, maize, and millet they rely on for their daily meals.

Children experience the most acute aspects of these shocks.



For daughters in particular, the promise of a dowry from the boy's family can mean income or livestock that offer a glimmer of hope of life beyond survival.

In a November 2021 World Vision South Sudan conducted a Rapid Gender Assessment for a Global Affairs Canada project in Tonj North, an area of the country that has seen violent clashes, mass displacement, and severe food insecurity. There, 55.8 per cent of the people World Vision's team interviewed confirmed having a child between 10 to 17 years old married. In some circumstances, a child's marriage is regarded as a form of protection.

Yet, child marriage is not only a matter of poverty or insecurity. Cultural norms and gender inequality disempower many girls and women.

Marriage is often planned by male relatives without the child's knowledge, and often to another man considerably older than the child themselves. Family pressure forces children into these marriage despite their explicit consent.

What's more, traditional beliefs that after a girl's first menstruation she is old enough to marry is startling.

While South Sudan's laws are clear and early marriage is prohibited, the implementation and enforcement of those laws remain a challenge.

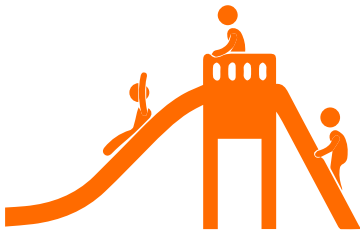
Child marriage must be rooted out through multiple approaches.

It takes broad reaching strategies that address poverty, insecurity, climate change preparedness, and traditional cultural beliefs that disempower girls and women. It requires strengthening community focused child protection mechanisms and establishing reporting systems that can intervene to stop early marriages. It needs further reaching education campaigns about the negative impacts of early marriage.

World Vision is grateful to its partners who have supported projects that address early marriage. There is much world to be done, but, step by step, change will occur.

Dr. Mesfin Loha
Country Director
World Vision South Sudan

In 2021, World Vision worked directly with **74,974** children in child protections programs by



Creating Child Friendly Spaces where children have safe places to play and learn



Training and supporting local child protection committees to respond to concerns about children in their community



Supporting child protection school clubs through information and knowledge



Organizing awareness campaigns about Gender Based Violence



Supporting continuous case management to survivors of Sexual Gender Based Violence




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