



Photo: Meredith Hutchison/IRC

## **VIOLENCE AGAINST ADOLESCENT GIRLS: TRENDS AND LESSONS FOR EAST AFRICA**

### *POLICY BRIEF*

Adolescence is a crucial and defining stage in a girl's life. However, girls around the world too often face unique risks of gender discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual violence, human trafficking, forced marriage and sexual exploitation and abuse. This is particularly the case in humanitarian settings, where girls' already-limited access to vital services and family and peer support networks are disrupted by crises and displacement. Despite this, humanitarian programmes and policies do not adequately address adolescent girls' needs. Caught between childhood and adulthood, these girls are often not able or willing to access services designed for adult women or young girls.

Adolescent girls face intersecting risks of violence due to their relative lack of power because of both their gender, and their status as children or young people in a world dominated by men. GBV against adolescent girls is rooted in systemic gender inequality, which underpins violence and leads to girls experiencing violence and harmful social norms and practices (like child, early, and forced marriage) at higher rates than their male counterparts. Harmful social norms can also compound girls' experience of violence, as some girls are considered "defiled" or "ruined" after rape.

This brief highlights research that examines the unique experience of adolescent girls by specifically exploring the types of gender-based violence and the drivers of this violence affecting this group within the context of South Sudan, where women and girls experience high levels of gender inequality and subordination. Key findings from this mixed-methods research can inform policymakers, UN agencies and donors as they identify and support programs that will effectively prevent and respond to violence against adolescent girls in conflict and humanitarian settings.

### **THE RESEARCH**

Data for this study was collected as part of the research program of the What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls ('What Works') Consortium funded by the government of the United Kingdom (UK)'s Department for International Development (DfID). Through this programme, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Global Women's Institute (GWI) at the George Washington University and CARE International UK conducted a mixed-methods study in five locations in South Sudan. Secondary analysis of this data set focusing on the experiences violence against adolescent girls (aged 15-19) was supported by the Gender and Adolescence:

Global Evidence (GAGE) consortium. Quantitative data collection focused on adolescent girls residing in the Juba Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites and the town of Rumbek. Qualitative data from the five study locations (Bentiu PoCs, Juba City, Juba County, Juba PoCs, Rumbek) was used to supplement the quantitative data.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Adolescent girls experience high levels of violence perpetrated by men and boys in South Sudan.

Over 20% of adolescent girls (15-18 year olds) have already experienced an incident of non-partner sexual violence. This finding suggests that not only is sexual violence against women and girls rampant in South Sudan, but violence is beginning very early in the lives of girls. In addition to non-partner sexual violence, adolescent girls are also experiencing violence perpetrated by male intimate partners with 39% of girls in the Juba PoCs and 42% of girls in Rumbek experiencing physical and/or sexual violence in the past year.

### Exposure to armed conflict is a major driver of multiple forms of male-perpetrated violence against adolescent girls.

The primary driver of male-perpetrated violence against adolescent girls identified in this study is exposure to conflict. Non-partner sexual violence targeting girls, as well as women, has been used as a tactic of war during the 2013 crisis and was a facet of the conflict between and within communities. A girl's odds of experiencing non-partner sexual violence were three to seven times higher if her village or community had been attacked. Conflict also contributed to the likelihood that a girl would experience intimate partner violence from a male partner (an increase of almost four-fold in the Juba PoCs).

### Conflict-related sexual violence can help entrench patriarchal practices that further the cycle of violence adolescent girls experience.

High rates of sexual violence create a narrative that girls need protection, which in the context of South Sudan often manifests as controlling behaviours and gender inequitable practices. For example, in order to "protect" girls and young women from rape, girls may be kept home from school, not allowed to leave the house and forced into child or early marriage. Conflict-related sexual violence compounds pre-existing patriarchal norms and practices including discrimination against girls and child, early and forced marriage.

### Adolescent girls are not accessing support services after they experience violence.

While girls sometimes tell family members or friends about incidents of violence, they still are not accessing formal services. More than 70% of adolescent girls in the Juba PoCs and over 50% in Rumbek reported that they did not access any formal service (health, legal, police, etc.) after an incident of violence. In South Sudan, the high percentage of male perpetrators of violence who were in positions of authority (e.g., police, armed actors, etc.), the stigma faced by girls who experience this violence, and the lack of confidentiality of existing reporting mechanisms (particularly the police) all may be barriers to reporting. Families were also found to often act as key gatekeepers who can facilitate or prevent girls from accessing services after violence.

### Adolescent girls in South Sudan demonstrate more equitable beliefs and less acceptance of violence compared to women, but face the same patriarchal practices.

In South Sudan, inequitable gender attitudes may be beginning to change as adolescent girls reported more equitable beliefs on gender attitudes and less acceptance of violence compared to women. For example in the Juba PoCs only 19% of girls agreed that "it is a wife's obligation to have sex with her husband whenever he wants it" compared to 42% of women. However, these girls are being raised in a society where patriarchal practices and views of violence are deeply entrenched, affecting the ability of girls to take actions that reflect these more equitable viewpoints. This reality may have fed into overall low help seeking behaviour among the study population and shows that social norms change is required to increase reporting rates among survivors.



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## **PROGRAMME AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Prioritise programming that responds to girls' needs and address barriers to adolescent girls' access to services.**

This study confirms that adolescent girls are at high risk of GBV during times of armed conflict. It also shows that adolescent girls are not accessing services after they experience violence. Service providers from health, psychosocial support, legal and security sectors need to be supported to target services to younger and older adolescent girls, within broader response programming. Building girls' trust in services and ensuring service providers' attitudes are supportive of adolescent girls accessing help are critical. Programmers must also target the families of girls, particularly mothers and fathers, to change harmful attitudes and practices that promote stigma and may prevent girls from accessing services. Parents may be utilized as conduits to support girls' access to services.

### **Prioritise funding for programming that prevents and responds to violence against adolescent girls within the home and the community from the time conflict begins.**

Adolescent girls are experiencing non-partner sexual violence and intimate partner violence and are affected by harmful traditional practices such as bride-price payment and child, early and forced marriage. To address these urgent problems, the humanitarian community needs to prioritize, design and fund programs that will comprehensively target all forms of violence an adolescent girl may experience.

### **Provide opportunities for adolescent girls' empowerment, while simultaneously addressing the wider patriarchal norms and power structures within communities.**

Adolescent girls often have less patriarchal views when compared to older women, but they are unable to take action on these beliefs within the context of their communities and South Sudanese culture where patriarchal norms still dominate. Social norms change programming that targets wider community behaviour and systemic change – particularly amongst those who hold power over adolescent girls and are decision-makers in their lives (female and male caregivers, husbands, etc.) – needs to be prioritized to ensure that adolescent girls are supported and exist in empowering environments where they are able to practice their autonomy. Programming for adolescent girls' empowerment will be more effective when supported by GBV response services and efforts to achieve wider social change for women and girls.

### **Violence against adolescent girls is often related to wider violence within and between communities. Peace-building efforts need to address the specific risks faced by adolescent girls and work to design empowerment-based protection strategies.**

Conflict-related violence (abductions for marriage, rape, etc.) often specifically targets and uniquely affects adolescent girls. These incidents can also have implications for wider community peace and stability. Peace-building efforts need to address the specific risks faced by adolescent girls and work to design empowerment-based protection-strategies. Efforts need to be made to reduce patriarchal "protection" instincts that often materialize as controlling behaviours (such as child, early and forced marriage or removal from school). Programmers need to work with communities to design risk mitigation and protection strategies that allow girls to continue in formal or informal education, build social networks and life-skills and develop confidence.

### **Create further synergies between violence against children and violence against women programming and policy efforts to ensure that the unique needs and experiences of adolescent girls are appropriately addressed within both.**

Given the unique experiences of girls and boys, child protection programming needs a gendered perspective. Protection programs specifically focused on the unique needs and experiences of girls are required to ensure that programming appropriately addresses the underlying power dynamics that affect girls, even in childhood. In addition, GBV actors need to consider age when assessing risks and vulnerabilities of women and girls and create programming that considers young and adolescent girls and adult and elderly women as distinct sub-groups that may require different approaches and supports. Both child protection and GBV programmers and policymakers must coordinate to address and prioritize prevention and response efforts that focus on the specific experiences of adolescent girls.

### **Develop and implement a policy and legal framework that ensures the equal rights of girls and need-based access to all services, including health, education, and justice.**

In South Sudan, existing legislation around the situation of girls is weak and basic protections for adolescent girls are lacking (for example, there is no legal age for marriage codified in the transitional constitution or child act). Further efforts are urgently needed to develop and implement girl-friendly policies and laws, in South Sudan specifically and in humanitarian contexts around the globe.



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WhatWorks  
TO PREVENT VIOLENCE  
Violence Against Women and Girls  
in Conflict and Humanitarian Crises



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