

# Experiences of early pregnancy among displaced female youth in South Sudan

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# Overview

Globally, one in five girls marry under the age of 18.<sup>2</sup> However, rates of early marriage are believed to *increase* during conflict and humanitarian crises.<sup>3</sup> Early marriage may have devastating consequences for the child bride, including higher rates of child and maternal mortality, poor physical and mental health outcomes, loss of access to education, and increased exposure to violence and poverty.<sup>4</sup> While the problem is clear, the solution is less so. One barrier is the lack of empirical knowledge on early marriage in conflict settings. Research conducted to date is very limited; what does exist arises mostly from development settings, is anecdotal, or is based on one-time assessments.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, girls who are already married, married as children and then divorced or were widowed, or are living with disabilities are rarely included in studies on early marriage. To address some of these gaps, Save the Children Denmark and the Feinstein International Center (FIC) of the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University created the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) research project in 2019 to study female youth and early marriage in displacement and conflict settings.

The LNOB project is currently conducting research in South Sudan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

(KRI). South Sudan has experienced multiple decades of conflict, ongoing political insecurity, extreme environmental events, and regular economic crises, which has left more than two-thirds of the population in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>6</sup> Approximately 2.3 million South Sudanese have become refugees in neighboring countries. An estimated 2 million more South Sudanese are internally displaced persons (IDPs), with humanitarian conditions reportedly worsening as of early 2022.<sup>7</sup> As of 2020, South Sudan's rate of child marriage was higher than the Sub-Saharan Africa average, with 52% of girls estimated to be married before the age of 18.<sup>8</sup>

The KRI has hosted Syrian refugees since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, with approximately 253,000 Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in the territory by early 2022.<sup>9</sup> The KRI also hosts about 600,000 IDPs, predominantly those from the Yazidi minority group, seeking refuge from internal conflicts, including the 2014 ISIS occupation of Sinjar and Mosul and subsequent military interventions.<sup>10</sup> Many of IDPs these populations live in substandard housing, are unable to access social safety nets, and have little opportunity to achieve durable solutions.<sup>11</sup> Rates of early marriage are lower within the KRI than in South Sudan, but these averages mask differences

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<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, "Child Marriage," October 2021, <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>.

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, "A Study on Early Marriage in Jordan 2014" (UNICEF Jordan Country Office, 2014); Jennifer Schlecht, Elizabeth Rowley, and Juliet Babirye, "Early Relationships and Marriage in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: Vulnerability of Youth in Uganda," *Reproductive Health Matters* 21, no. 41 (2013): 234–42; UNICEF, "Falling through the Cracks; The Children of Yemen," 2016; Girls Not Brides, "Child Marriage in Humanitarian Contexts," Thematic Brief, August 2020.

<sup>4</sup> UNFPA and UNICEF, "Addressing Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings," February 2021; E El Arab and M. Sagbakken, "Child Marriage of Female Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: A Literature Review," *Global Health Action* 12 (2019): 1–12; Yvette Efevbera et al., "Girl Child Marriage, Socioeconomic Status, and Undernutrition: Evidence from 35 Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa," *BMC Medicine* 17, no. 55 (2019); Save the Children, "Too Young to Wed: The Growing Problem of Child Marriage among Syrian Girls in Jordan," 2014; World Bank Group, "Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity," 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Dyan Mazurana and Anastasia Marshak, "Addressing Data Gaps on Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Humanitarian Settings" (Save the Children and Tufts University, December 2019).

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "South Sudan: Humanitarian Snapshot," February 2022, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/south\\_sudan\\_humanitarian\\_snapshot\\_february\\_0.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/south_sudan_humanitarian_snapshot_february_0.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

<sup>8</sup> UNICEF, "Some Things Are Not Fit for Children-- Marriage Is One of Them," Press Release, October 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/southsudan/press-releases/some-things-are-not-fit-for-children>.

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, "UNHCR Syria and Iraq Situations: 2022 Response Overview," 2022, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/1799>.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OHCA), "Iraq: Humanitarian Dashboard for KRI (January to December 2019)," 2020, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iraq\\_humanitarian\\_dashboard\\_2019\\_summary\\_for\\_kri.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iraq_humanitarian_dashboard_2019_summary_for_kri.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OHCA).

in early marriage rates among refugees, hosts, and IDPs. In a representative study conducted by the Women's Refugee Commission, IDPs showed the highest rate of early marriage among the three groups, with 13% of those currently aged 20–24 having married as minors.<sup>12</sup> This study also showed a potential increase in the rates of early marriage for refugees after displacement.<sup>13</sup>

**The Project** This briefing paper is one in a series of outputs arising from the LNOB research.<sup>14</sup> LNOB relies on longitudinal, participatory research methodologies to understand the wide range of experiences, difficulties, opportunities, and constraints faced by female youth who have been displaced by or have experienced conflict. While the project's focus is holistic and multisectoral, particular attention is paid to the practice and experience of early marriage. The project examines multiple displaced and conflict-affected populations. These include internally displaced South Sudanese living in formal and informal camps, and Syrian refugees and displaced Yazidi and Arab Iraqis located in camp and non-camp settings in the KRI. Four local researchers from affected communities (two from each case country) were central to the design of the study, participant interviews, and analysis of data.

LNOB's main source of data comes from a cohort of female youth, predominantly between

the ages of 14 and 23,<sup>15</sup> who were regularly interviewed in 2020 and 2021 using surveys, semi-structured interviews, and participatory methods that include drawings and photographs. Members of the cohort are unmarried, married as minors, divorced, or widowed. The cohort also includes female youth who became pregnant under the age 18, and female youth living with physical, emotional, or intellectual disabilities, regardless of marital status. Family members of participants were interviewed when possible. LNOB also interviewed key informants, which included representatives from government entities, the United Nations, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), camp managers, teachers, health workers, and community and religious leaders. At the time of this brief (April 2022), 600 interviews have been conducted. One hundred and thirty-nine female youth have been interviewed as part of the cohort. Each participant was interviewed an average of four times (range: 1–13 interviews). In addition, 87 key informants were interviewed, as well as 17 family members of female youth. LNOB is currently seeking funding to continue following the cohort into the future and to expand the number of country cases, methodologies, and sample size.

<sup>12</sup> K Hunnerson et al., "Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in the Arab States Region: Study Results from Djibouti, Egypt, Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Yemen" (Women's Refugee Commission, 2020). For this same age group the rates of early marriage were 3.4% for Syrian refugees and 4% for the host community. However, for girls aged 10–19 at the time of the study, 1 in 8 IDPs were married and 1 in 10 host and refugee communities were married.

<sup>13</sup> Hunnerson et al.

<sup>14</sup> See additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>

<sup>15</sup> The sample also includes a subset of participants over the age of 23 because they represented an interesting set of characteristics such as: widows with teenage daughters who married as children; unmarried women above the "typical marriage age."

# Introduction

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According to UNICEF data from South Sudan in 2020, about one-third of all girls in South Sudan become pregnant before turning 15.<sup>16</sup> The South Sudan Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare reports that the risks of sexual abuse, child marriage, and early pregnancy for girls have increased in the last few years given school closures, more time spent at home, and increased stress due to COVID-19.<sup>17</sup>

Key informants from UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and camp management interviewed for this study overwhelmingly agree with these observations. While most acknowledge that the prevalence of early pregnancy was high even before the conflict, they have observed the growing prevalence of early pregnancy due to displacement and the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions. Key informants commonly observed female youth aged 14, 15, and 16 getting pregnant; just over half of these pregnancies were believed to lead to early marriages. Analysis of the data for this study shows that from the cohort of female youth in South Sudan (n = 49), the average age of pregnancy was 15.9 years of age, and just under half of the participants were pregnant out of wedlock (n = 23).

The following thematic brief takes as a point of departure in unpacking these observations and experiences an in-depth exploration into the attitudes, knowledge, and impact of early pregnancy on female youths' lives in three displacement settings in South Sudan: Juba Protection of Civilians (POC) site, Mangateen internally displaced person (IDP) site in Juba, and Bentiu POC site. The paper describes the unintentionality of early pregnancy for many female youth and the implications that it has for future marriage prospects, education, livelihoods, and social relations within the family and community.

The focus of this paper is on the group of female youth who had early pregnancies before the age of 18. We examine both those who did not marry and those for whom early pregnancy led to marriage, with the focus for the latter group being the proposal and marriage processes initiated because of the early pregnancy. Although nearly all the cases of early marriage in South Sudan led to early pregnancies before the age of 18, more in-depth analysis of these specific experiences will be covered in the briefing papers on *education, mental health, motherhood, life after marriage, and the experiences of divorced and widowed female youth*.<sup>18</sup>

## Main Findings

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### *Unintentionality of pregnancy*

***Most pregnancies are unintentional and are happening despite having personal and/or familial ideals to delay motherhood and marriage.***

When asked how they felt about having an early pregnancy before marriage, most participants said they were sad, shocked, disappointed, and scared. They said that they were not intending to get pregnant.

Most of the participants in the cohort conveyed that they have no knowledge, very little knowledge, or even misinformation about getting pregnant, menstruation, sex, preventing a pregnancy, and delaying a pregnancy. For example, this 19-year-old mother described, “I knew a little bit—I knew that if I was near my period, I shouldn’t have sex and if it was far, I could.”<sup>19</sup> This 23-year-old who had an early pregnancy described, “When I had my children, I did not know how to get pregnant.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> UNICEF, “Some Things Are Not Fit for Children—Marriage Is One of Them” (Press Release, October 2020), <https://www.unicef.org/southsudan/press-releases/some-things-are-not-fit-for-children>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> To read the additional briefing papers, visit the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_18\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_19\_F\_EP\_23, Juba, South Sudan.

A few participants mentioned that although they did not have information about how to prevent pregnancy when they were first sexually active or before having their first child, some had more recently received information from an NGO or heard of services available for adolescent girls and women. When asked whether she had ever received information on sexual and reproductive health, one 19-year-old participant said, “I did not know anything about that. There was no information at least for me at the time—I had no idea. Right now, there are some NGOs that come here and give awareness, but I see myself as a woman, so don’t need that.”<sup>21</sup> Conversely, some family planning services—like receiving a contraceptive injection—are seen as being only for married women, as female youth are often too “scared” to go to clinics for fear of being judged promiscuous; as one girl explained, “I’ve only ever seen married girls go there. People would be scared to go there if they were unmarried—scared that people would talk and [say] that she is sleeping with boys.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite participants reporting that many of their friends have boyfriends, there is fear and shame for female youth in having a boyfriend publicly, and in accessing sexual and reproductive health services or asking mothers or older sisters about contraception. Beyond ad-hoc services provided by NGOs for female youth (typically awareness raising on the dangers of early pregnancy to health and how to prevent pregnancy) and some family planning services for women, contraceptives are typically not available in either the formal or informal camps. There is also a financial barrier for female youth and women because “at any clinic you go to you have to pay money to visit.”<sup>23</sup> One respondent said:

“When you are still young you are scared of asking someone how to protect yourself, because you are a young girl. If you ask this, they will know that you want to date someone or that you want to have a boyfriend.”<sup>24</sup>

Many participants report still not knowing how to prevent a pregnancy *despite* having had children

<sup>21</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_15\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_8\_F\_EP\_20, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_11\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_7\_F\_U\_15\_FAM, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_6\_F\_M\_22\_FAM, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_32\_EP\_20\_FAM, Juba, South Sudan.

and visiting a hospital or clinic for the births. When asked whether she knew how to protect herself from becoming pregnant, one participant replied, “I did not know anything about this and still do not. I gave birth in a small clinic built by foreigners, but they did not tell me anything about contraception after I gave birth.”<sup>25</sup>

The older women, mothers, and caregivers who were interviewed did not feel comfortable speaking to their daughters about family planning. When asked whether she talks to her daughter about contraception, a mother said, “I do not know myself about this so can’t talk to my daughter about it. Lots of girls get pregnant in school but I am just leaving it to God to protect my daughter. Many parents are scared of keeping girls in school once they are 15 or so, and they take them to the village to get them married with cows [as bridewealth].”<sup>26</sup> One female primary caregiver we interviewed asked us directly for more information about family planning so she could pass it on to her 13-year-old daughter, as she “is scared that she is going to get pregnant.”<sup>27</sup> Another mother we interviewed said the extent to which she talks with her daughters about sexual reproductive health is when they reach 13 years old: “I have a talk to them about being a girl—they cannot speak to boys, they cannot sleep together.”<sup>28</sup> This mother said that she herself did not know how to prevent or delay pregnancy.

## ***Early pregnancy and the burden on the family***

***Early pregnancy often significantly negatively affects the economic situation of the natal family, which impacts the social dynamics within the family.***

Many participants reported having intensely strained relationships with their family members throughout their pregnancies. Fathers, uncles, brothers, and mothers were reported to get very angry, become violent, and take to insulting the participants, with



some female youth even receiving death threats from male family members. In the early months of pregnancy, it was reportedly common for the family to cut communication with their teenage daughter. One participant saw the strained social dynamics as a form of punishment for her betrayal: “For the girl who gets pregnant, they don’t see you as a human being, they only see you as betraying the family... Even the child will suffer... Everyone thinks that the girl who gets pregnant should suffer.”<sup>29</sup>

Another explained the strain she felt with her family and the sadness the bad relations caused her:

“The first few months [of pregnancy] were the most sad and stressful in my life. My father used to beat me up a lot, almost every single day. He used to insult me all the time. He treated me very badly. He was really angry about my pregnancy... Before I used to talk on the phone with [my mother] a lot, but when I got pregnant, she did not want to communicate with me on the phone or ask about how I was doing... I was sad about it.”<sup>30</sup>

In some cases, the participants ran away to their boyfriends’ homes to avoid being beaten by family members and would only return to their natal homes after the births:

“The pregnancy was not planned, and so I was sad when I found out. When I went home to tell my parents, they were so angry at me. They were mad, and they said, ‘Now you are impregnated, there is nothing we can get from you. You have ruined your life. You can no longer go to school.’ So, I ran away from home to avoid being beaten up.”<sup>31</sup>

Parents and caregivers who cut contact often only “accepted” their daughters again if and when they stopped having contact with their boyfriends. In other cases, the birth of the child catalyzed the healing of the relationship, such as described by this 20-year-old participant: “I was happy when

I gave birth to my son because I know a child always brings happiness at home and especially because everybody was mad at me.”<sup>32</sup> There were, however, several cases of participants who reported continued bad relations with their family members even after the birth of one or more children.

Parents and caregivers’ violent reactions to and disappointment in their daughters’ early pregnancies before marriage often stem from the negative effect early pregnancy has on the participant and her family’s reputation, which is tied up (in part) in the economics of bridewealth. A few participants explained that there were added expectations for the first-born girl in the family, to ensure economic security for her family, especially in securing cows and income so her brothers could afford a future marriage. The study participants explained that when a Nuer female youth is married in South Sudan, the husband’s family will pay bridewealth of anywhere between 15 and 60 cows, or the equivalent in cash, to her family, a practice confirmed by scholars. After the payment of bridewealth, the female youth will then join her husband’s family’s household. However, key informants and participants explained that if a female youth gets pregnant before marriage, it is customary in Nuer culture for the baby’s father’s family to pay 3 cows in compensation to her and her family for the pregnancy, a so-called “pregnancy price” or “paternity payment.”<sup>34</sup> In some cases, the baby’s father will deny paternity to get out of paying the bridewealth and/or paternity price:

“At first the boy said that he was not the father. Then when I insisted, he said that he would go and talk to his brothers. But his brothers said that he was too young and not responsible enough to get married, and also his older brothers were themselves not even married. I was very sad because at this point it meant that there was no one else I could go to. I had wanted him to marry me so that we could stay together

<sup>29</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_15\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_25\_F\_M\_18, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_18\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_32\_F\_EP\_20, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>33</sup> J. Goody, “Bridewealth and Dowry in Africa and Eurasia,” in *Bridewealth and Dowry*, ed. J. Goody and S. J. Tambiah (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 1–58; S. Hutchinson, “The Cattle of the Money and the Cattle of Girls among the Nuer 1930–83,” *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 2 (1992): 294–316.

<sup>34</sup> S. McKinnon, “Domestic Exceptions: Evans-Pritchard and the Creation of Nuer Patrilineality and Equality,” *Cultural Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2000): 35–83.

with our child, but I had no choice because the boy's family said we could not marry."<sup>35</sup>

In line with existing scholarship, the participants explained that after the pregnancy price is paid, it was most common for participants to live with her natal family and raise her child without support from the father or the father's family.<sup>36</sup> Not only do the parents and caregivers miss out on the full bridewealth they would have received through marriage, but they also often have an added burden of caring for their daughter and her child:

"Before I got pregnant my mother used to support me with the things I needed if she can be able to get it, but since I got pregnant my mother does not care about my needs. I only ask her to support my son sometimes...I don't know where [the father of my child's family] are. They don't talk to me or support my son. Only my mother helps me with my son."<sup>37</sup>

Even if the pregnancy price is paid, it is designed as a one-off payment and does not extend to ongoing support for the child over time:

"My boyfriend's family are back in the village. They don't really communicate as often, and they don't support me with the children. I am left to struggle with them alone...If your husband does not take you home as a wife, they don't really support you if he's not there, because you were not officially introduced."<sup>38</sup>

It was extremely common for the participants to report feelings of intense disappointment in losing the prospect of marriage and the stress from lost financial security for them, their children, and their families. The mental health and psychosocial burden experienced by most participants was often compounded by the heavy burden of household chores and domestic duties. Participants often felt

overwhelmed by motherhood. Our local researchers consistently expressed concern about the mental health of the participants, particularly the young mothers, reporting traits of absentmindedness and chronic stress. They reported that one participant accidentally left her children behind at the market.

As explained by the study participants, there is an added stress for mothers in Nuer culture who commonly lose custody of their children when their children reach 7 or 8 years of age.<sup>39</sup> If the father and his family have paid the three-cow pregnancy/paternity price, they have a right to claim custody. Many of the participants in the cohort expressed anxiety at the thought of their child or children being taken away but were also resigned to it being a normal cultural practice. In one case, the participant opted not to inform the father of her child of her pregnancy for fear of him claiming custody. In this case, she preferred to raise the child on her own:

"I will not tell him because I am afraid that he will take the child away from me. Because I am alone, my mother is dead, my father is dead, and my uncle has died. I have no one to speak on my behalf. I will raise the child by myself."<sup>40</sup>

A female youth in such a circumstance faces a predicament, as acknowledging the baby's paternity would likely bring economic support in the form of the pregnancy price but would likely mean losing custody down the road. In addition, the girl still bears criticism from her family for falling pregnant and damaging marriage (and bridewealth) prospects. Further damage may be done to her personal reputation, in that by not acknowledging the baby's father she opens herself to charges of promiscuity.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_11\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>36</sup> O. Stern, "This Is How Marriage Happens Sometimes": Women and Marriage in South Sudan," in *Hope, Pain and Patience: The Lives of Women in South Sudan*, ed. F. Bubenzer and O. Stern (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2012), 1–23.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_8\_F\_EP\_18, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_15\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>39</sup> For more in-depth discussion on the laws and customs including child custody in South Sudan, see: R. Ibreck, H. Logan, and N. Pendle, "Negotiating Justice: Courts as Local Civil Authority during the Conflict in South Sudan" (The Justice and Security Research Program and the London School of Economics, 2017); J. K. Edward, "South Sudanese Refugee Women: Questioning the Past, Imagining the Future," in *Women's Rights and Human Rights*, ed. P. Grimshaw, K. Holmes, and M. Lake (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_19\_F\_EP\_23, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>41</sup> For an in-depth look at how adolescent girls navigate multiple dilemmas and trade-offs of motherhood in South Sudan see: S. Kane et al., "You Have a Child Who Will Call You 'Mama': Understanding Adolescent Pregnancy in South Sudan," *Global Health Action* 12, no. 1 (2019).

## Prospects for marriage

**Early pregnancy makes a female youth's marriage prospects precarious. Marriages after early pregnancies, whether to the father of the baby or another man, are characterized by force, violence, divorce/separation, and loss of custody of children.**

Almost half of all mothers in the South Sudan cohort had a pregnancy before marriage. Most of these pregnancies did not lead to marriage with the father of the baby. However, after falling pregnant prematurely and damaging economic prospects for bridewealth, many participants reported feeling a sense of indebtedness and obligation to accept a marriage arranged by their parent or caregiver when a different suitor was willing to pay bridewealth. Such suitors were often older men and those with multiple wives who were able to afford bridewealth and did not mind that the girl has already given birth. Hence when the option for marriage did arise, there was often a substantial age gap between the couple:<sup>42</sup>

“If my brother decides to marry me off, I will just agree to it. I feel bad because he was the one who raised me, and he missed out on bridewealth...it was my mistake that I got pregnant. I do not have anything now, so I would give something to my family and marry again if asked.”<sup>43</sup>

In the cases where early pregnancy led to marriage with the father of the child or with another man, the marriage process—and often subsequent marriage relations—were often characterized by force, violence, or exploitation.

One of the participants fell pregnant with a boyfriend, an age-mate, who paid the pregnancy price but did not pursue marriage. She became pregnant by another man during our study, in what appeared to be a marriage of convenience. When asked whether this second man was her boyfriend, she replied, “No, he is a man that wants to marry me...he wants to marry me and promised me that

he will support my mother and my son too. He said that he wants me to go back to school, and he will support me.”<sup>44</sup> At 42 years old, he is considerably older than her 18 years and has two other wives and children but was able to pay a considerable bridewealth to her mother. As per custom in South Sudan, she is staying with her mother and her other young child until she gives birth to her new husband's baby. She is unsure whether her first-born child will be able to join her in her new husband's home, but it is a sacrifice she is willing to make for economic security and hope of a better life for her mother, herself, and her children.

Another participant in the cohort, who had an early pregnancy with her boyfriend, also felt she had no choice in marrying an older man willing to pay bridewealth. In this case, the marriage proposal was threatening and violent:

“When I got pregnant my family was very angry with me because I disappointed them, and I brought shame to the family. My oldest brother and my other male relatives did not like it, and they said I have denied them a chance to get cows. When I gave birth to my son, my brother and uncle started mentioning marriage to me, and when my child turned one year old, my oldest brother said that there is a man who wants to marry me, and I must marry him. I refused, but [my brother] threatened to beat me up and take me to [the suitor's] house by force. [My brother] said since I decided to get pregnant the first time that's what I was planning to do again, and he cannot allow me to bring shame to the family. So, I decided to accept the marriage. I was taken to the home as a wife. After three days after [my husband] brought my [bridewealth to my family].”<sup>45</sup>

Being forced to marry in this circumstance led to an unhappy marriage and loss of custody of her child:

“I am very unhappy. I don't like that man I have been married to because it was not my decision to marry him. I also want to be with my son, but I cannot because I can't stay with another man's child in my husband's house.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> A common phenomenon more deeply explored in A. Kuper, *Wives for Cattle: Bridewealth and Marriage in Southern Africa* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_15\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_8\_F\_EP\_18, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with respondent # SSB\_CO\_9\_M\_18, Bentiu, South Sudan.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



Two other notable cases of early pregnancy leading to forced and exploitative marriages were in instances of early pregnancy from rape:<sup>47</sup>

“He admitted what he did to me before my mother and his family members. He said he wanted to marry me and gave my mother 400 USD [United States dollars]. I remained in his household with his family from that same day.”<sup>48</sup>

The other case was an incidence of sexual exploitation by a significantly older man working for a local NGO.<sup>49</sup> Other than these cases, most early pregnancies occurred with age-mates: “boyfriends” from school or acquaintances from a local traditional dance or communal gathering point. Female youth frequently reported talking to these boys, then them becoming their boyfriends over a period of months, sometimes years. Many entered the relationship with the promise of marriage from their boyfriend:

“Lots of the girls are falling pregnant because the boys will lie to the girls and get them pregnant...A lot of boys will tell the girl ‘I want to marry you’ and how their families have a lot of cows to pay bridewealth, and so they should marry. And so, the girls will accept [fall for] this lie.”<sup>50</sup>

“I met another man that I was in love with. He told me he wanted to marry me, and so I accepted him. I got pregnant by him, and he told me that he would go to Juba first and I should follow him after before my pregnancy starts to show, so that I could go and give birth in Juba, and after that he would meet my family and talk about my marriage. So, I went after him to Juba in 2019. After a few months of staying with him and his family here in Mangateen he just left, and I have never seen him until today.”<sup>51</sup>

The idea of marriage was particularly attractive for some of the cohort participants whose families were living far away or had died, those with a smaller familial network,<sup>52</sup> and those particularly affected by economic hardship. One key informant from a UN agency pointed to the increased exploitation of young girls as poverty increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. She explained that “a few men provide gifts, like phones, in exchanges for sex or exchange for an outing.”<sup>53</sup> Another NGO worker from Juba POC agreed that sexual exploitation by older or wealthier men is common in the setting of displacement camps.<sup>54,55</sup>

While some female youth entered sexual relationships with hopes for marriage, for many others casual sexual relationships were a normal part of their teenage experience, especially in a camp setting. Many respondents reported having consensual relationships with young men living in the camp, often frequently meeting at water points, schools, and communal areas. Some parents and caregivers felt that the close living conditions in the camp and the mixing of boys and girls at school created greater interaction between young men and women than would be common in their rural villages, such as described by this 19-year-old female youth: “In the village, people live separately. People live very close to each other in Mangateen... the families interact with each other, they learn from other children...at school they interact with boys.”<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, in many cases, the prospect of marriage was not thought of until the girl accidentally became pregnant: “I was thinking about it [marriage] but not as much as I did when I got pregnant.”<sup>57</sup>

The majority of the unintended pregnancies in the sample did not result in marriage or full bridewealth

<sup>47</sup> Interview with respondent # SSB\_CO\_15\_M\_19, Bentiu, South Sudan.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with respondent # SSB\_CO\_15\_M\_19, Bentiu, South Sudan.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with respondent # SSB\_CO\_13\_EP\_20, Bentiu, South Sudan.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_15\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_34\_F\_EP\_23, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_11\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan; interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_15\_F\_EP\_19 Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Gender Analyst # SS\_KII\_5\_F, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Camp Manager # SS\_KII\_23, Juba, South Sudan

<sup>55</sup> For more on the “sugar daddy” phenomenon in southern Africa, see B. Kuate-Defo, “Young People’s Relationships with Sugar Daddies and Sugar Mummies: What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know?” *African Journal of Reproductive Health/La Revue de La Santé Reproductive* 8, no. 2 (n.d.): 13–37.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_32\_EP\_20\_FAM, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_15\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

payment.<sup>58</sup> Reasons for this were varied, but included lack of acceptance from the female youths' fathers or parents because of lack of economic potential or inability to pay the full bridewealth,<sup>59</sup> as explained by this participant: "He [the father] might say that the boy does not have enough resources, that the bridewealth would not be big enough."<sup>60</sup> Other reasons why early pregnancies did not lead to marriage include the denial of paternity, if the boyfriend's family thought he was too immature, if the boyfriend's older brothers had yet to marry,<sup>61</sup> or if the boyfriend had moved or run away.

Interestingly, in cases where the couple's relationship could be characterized as a consensual love relationship, half of these relationships ended in separation, divorce, and isolation from natal families.<sup>62</sup> On the promise of marriage and future payment of the full bridewealth, the female youth would move into her boyfriend's family home, acting as his wife. In many cases, however, the payments were never, or only partially, made. The female youth's family, or the youth herself, would start to put pressure on the boy and his family to finish the payments, which in many cases led to tensions between the couple and their families, and ended in separation and divorce:

"I met my husband here in the POC. We knew each other because we were living in the same area. When I got pregnant by him, his family paid five cows to my family and promised to finish giving my family the rest of the cows soon. I went to live with my husband and his family for three years. I saw that he did not care to finish paying my family the full bridewealth they had promised, so I went back to my parents' house, and I never went back to my husband's home."<sup>63</sup>

Another participant had a similar experience, which led to violence within her home:

"We met in the POC, and we got to know each other until he became my boyfriend. After one

year of knowing each other, he asked me to marry him, and in 2014 I accepted. I went to live with him, but he did not pay any bridewealth as he said he did not have any cows. In 2016, I gave birth to my first child, and in 2018 I gave birth to my daughter. My family kept asking him for the cows and when they demand for him to pay bridewealth, he started telling me that all my family wants to divorce me from him. He started biting me and hitting me."<sup>64</sup>

In this instance, the participants family "accepted me [back] because the man was hurting me, and he did not pay any bridewealth." There are also instances where families have not supported a love marriage and did not afford the female youth the same help when she needed support or if the marriage was in trouble:

"My family is still in Pangak. I have not talked to them since I ran away with my husband, but I heard from my cousin and my other relatives who are here in Juba that they are blaming me because they did not support my decision to get married to him, and they will not help me with my struggles that I brought to myself."<sup>65</sup>

There was only a small number of cases where the early pregnancy led to marriage with the baby's father and resulted in full bridewealth payment.

<sup>58</sup> For more on the increasing inability for male youth to meet the rising bridewealth demands, see: M. Sommers and S. Schwartz, "Dowry and Division: Youth and Statebuilding in South Sudan," Special Report (US Institute of Peace, Washington DC, n.d.).

<sup>59</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_16\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_18\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan; interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_32\_F\_EP\_20, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_11\_F\_EP\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>62</sup> For more on how we have defined consensual relationships, see the briefing paper on Perspectives on Early Marriage at <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_46\_F\_DIV\_21, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_43\_F\_DIV\_21, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_42\_F\_DIV\_20, Juba, South Sudan.

## ***Spotlight on unintended pregnancies of female youth with disabilities***

In three cases of early pregnancy with female youth with disabilities, early pregnancies did not lead to marriage. It seemed to be commonly accepted that boyfriends were not expected to marry a girl with a disability.

As one participant with severe physical ailments, tumors, and stunted growth from childhood said, “People with disabilities are not really marriageable. For example, the father of my children, I had children with him but now I am staying with my mother, he didn’t want to marry me. And we are not in touch.”

When her boyfriend and her family found out she was pregnant with her first child at 17 years old, the participant said her family were “shocked” because “they didn’t even think I could get pregnant or have a baby. They just accepted me, but they were shocked. My boyfriend didn’t marry me. He accepted the children but no marriage. In those days, he wanted to continue to be my boyfriend.”

When asked why her boyfriend did not want to marry her, she said, “He was afraid he couldn’t do anything to help me or the child. He was afraid to take that responsibility in front of my parents,” despite the boyfriend being much older than she was and having other wives. He fathered another child with her three years later. The participant expressed sadness at not having an opportunity to marry, thinking “a man will just get me, and get me pregnant, without marriage.”<sup>66</sup>

Another participant, who lost her leg when caught in fighting on the journey to the POC in Bentiu, also had an early pregnancy that did not lead to marriage. Similarly, the boyfriend

neither assumed responsibility for the baby nor felt obliged to marry the participant, claiming he “will not marry a crippled girl.” The participant feels very sad about this but claims “there is nothing I can do because he sees me as a burden to him because of my disability. There is nothing much I can help him with...I cannot do a lot of things in his house. A woman is supposed to do housework.”

When asked whether there are different normative community expectations for marrying a girl with a disability, she said, “Yes, the girls who have disabilities don’t get married. If they get married, the man pays fewer cows, because she will still stay with her parents at home but just produce children for the man.”<sup>67</sup>

A participant who was 14 years old and pregnant at the time of our interview suffered what she described as “fainting,” which prevented her from going to school, leaving the house, or socializing. The participant’s father had made an arrangement for her marriage to the father of her baby, which started with a pregnancy price payment and promise of bridewealth. However, evidence presented here shows that a promise of bridewealth after birth does not necessarily mean the bridewealth materializes.

This participant explained, “The man gave [my father] three cows and when I give birth, he will pay more cows. My father said that the man wants to marry me, and that I should be with him because he will marry me.” She said she did not previously know this man, only his name, but that he often comes from outside the POC to “take me away from home, when it is very late at night, to go where he stays.” When asked how she felt about her father giving her to a man, she said, “I just accept what he told me, because [the man] will marry me.”<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_1\_F\_DIS\_19, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with respondent # SSB\_CO\_16\_DIS\_20, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with respondent # SSB\_CO\_22\_DIS\_14, Bentiu, South Sudan.

## Education and early pregnancy

**Going back to school after childbirth is possible, and common, despite dropping out of school during pregnancy.<sup>69</sup>**

Among all participants in South Sudan who had early pregnancies, the average level of school years completed was approximately 5 years. At the start of the study, many of the schools were temporarily closed due to COVID-19 restrictions, but they subsequently reopened during the latter stages of data collection.

In almost all cases of early pregnancy before marriage, the respondent reported that she stopped attending school when she became pregnant. Some said they felt sick or too tired to continue school, and others said they had not seen other pregnant girls attending school. While not part of official school policy, local researchers described that school staff may pressure pregnant girls to drop out of school.

Pregnancy also interrupts education due to cultural norms that influence where and with whom a pregnant female should live. According to study respondents and key informants, it is common for Nuer women to travel back to their home villages and stay with non-immediate female relatives (such as an aunt or grandmother) for approximately one year during the pregnancy and early months after the birth. Mothers and babies then return to their marital households or to their natal families if not residing with the child's father. This practice continued in a number of cases in the study sample, despite the displacement and camp setting, though it depended on the location of the extended family and overall security. In instances where the respondent was living with the baby's father, she sometimes returned to her mother's home for the pregnancy and birth, even if her mother was residing in the same camp. Based on these traditions around pregnancy, it is not surprising that female youth's school attendance ceased during this time.

However, nearly half of the study participants who were in school at the time of their pregnancy

returned to school at some point after giving birth, regardless of their marital status. Just over half of these participants returned to finish their last year of primary school (class eight), despite their ages ranging from 18 to 20 years old.<sup>70</sup> Others went back to finish secondary school (classes nine to twelve). These young mothers were able to find childcare support from their sisters, mothers, and even neighbors. In some cases, the babies' fathers were able to help support them with school fees, even in cases where the couple was not married. Motherhood did pose an obstacle to regular attendance, with some respondents reporting missing school when their child was sick or if they could not find childcare. Others were turned away for not having a uniform or funds to pay school fees—experiences that are not unique to adolescent mothers.

Among the approximately one-half of study participants who did not return to school after pregnancy, a common reason was around new ambiguity for the young women in expectations as a mother and, for some, also as a wife. Another frequently cited reason for not going to school was the new financial responsibilities and need to prioritize income generation after the birth of a child:

“I have not gone [back] to school because there is not enough money for me to go. The little money that I get, I take care of my child with it...I feel bad, and it makes me lose hope in life sometimes because I don't know what else to do.”<sup>71</sup>

Female youth who give birth may either have an extra burden of household chores and childcaring needs in their natal homes or must themselves find new employment opportunities to support themselves and their children. One participant says she uses the little money she does have to buy books for her child and to send her to school. Almost all participants, despite their level of education, had ambitions for their children to go to school, although most of the children were too young to attend at the time of interviewing.

<sup>69</sup> For more on education and displacement of female youth as part of this study, see briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

<sup>70</sup> There are no upper age limits for boys and girls to attend primary school in South Sudan.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_8\_F\_EP\_18, Juba, South Sudan.

## Parents' attitude towards education

*Parents had mixed attitudes towards education for their daughters, seeing it as both a protective factor and a potential driver for early pregnancy and early marriage.*

Parents' attitudes toward the value of education for female youth are mixed, both as reported by their daughters and as stated in direct interviews with parents. Some participants reported that their parents were resistant to their returning to school after giving birth, as they feared they might get pregnant again: "In my family, they don't believe that girls can focus in school. If I go back, they think I would get pregnant again. They don't trust me."<sup>72</sup>

Many parents feel that female youth are at risk of getting pregnant and having boyfriends when they go to school, as this female youth explains:

"It is not a good school—even though it is free. Even the teachers are just students who are teaching other students. When I was going to school before, the girls who go would fall pregnant. And my mother wasn't happy about the school, because of the pregnancies there. She thought it would be better to leave school and get married."<sup>73</sup>

One mother we interviewed concurred. She said that "most of the parents are scared [their daughters] will get pregnant. Most of the families support the children to go to school, but the girls are getting pregnant. They will want to take the girls to a village to get married [instead]."<sup>74</sup> Indeed, some female respondents reported that they had been discouraged from attending school by parents who feared they would fall pregnant in school. These female youth dropped out, only to become pregnant once not in school:

"My parents told me that I had to stop school because they were afraid I would get pregnant. They wanted me to stop so that I could prepare for marriage. In our family, they think that girls who go to school will not get married and

instead will fall pregnant. So, it is good at 15 or 16 to leave school."

*Did you agree with your parents' decision to take you from school?* "I didn't feel good. But I have to follow my parents. I respect them so much. I can't make my own decision."<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_32\_F\_EP\_20, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_31\_F\_W\_18, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_6\_F\_M\_22\_FAM, Juba, South Sudan. This concern is a common one in a number of contexts. See, for instance, M. J. Grant, "Girls' Schooling and the Perceived Threat of Adolescent Sexual Activity in Rural Malawi," *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 14, no. 1 (2012): 73–86.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with respondent # SS\_CO\_5\_F\_M\_19, Juba, South Sudan.



# Conclusions and Recommendations

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The experiences of female youth who have experienced early pregnancy while living in displacement contexts in South Sudan highlight a range of challenges for programmers and policy makers across different sectors. Female youth who have had early pregnancies have unique needs but the services in these settings—including healthcare, education, and other social services—are ill-equipped to meet these needs. Findings from this study are highly relevant for national and international humanitarian programmers and policy makers working on issues of child marriage. Here we revisit some of the main findings and link them to specific implications and recommendations for action:

- » Early pregnancy often significantly negatively affects the economic situation of the natal family. This is due not only to the missed opportunities for bridewealth but also to the added financial cost of raising a child as well as maintaining an adolescent daughter. Female youth who have had an early pregnancy but are not married may be excluded from targeted child marriage prevention or response programming. Extra effort should be made to include female youth in programming, including livelihood/vocational skills training components and cash programming for her *and* her natal family.
- » Family dynamics within the natal household are often particularly strained after an unintended pregnancy. Specific interventions helping to build stronger relationships between female youth and their parents and caregivers are strongly encouraged; for example: mental health and psychosocial support to youth and their caregivers; facilitated family dialogues in safe spaces; and workshops on non-violent parenting approaches.
- » As a form of mental health support, young mothers would also benefit from targeted parenting courses aiming to build positive relationships, brain development, and emotional connection between mother and infant.
- » Early pregnancy can act as a catalyst for child marriage, with marriages after early pregnancies more likely to be characterized by force, violence, divorce/separation, and loss of custody of children. These consequences could be more widely known by youth, parents, and community members alike and included in prevention awareness messages for delaying child marriage.
- » None of the participants who had an early pregnancy understood the basics of conception or family planning after birth. Sexual reproductive health and rights interventions should be expanded for younger youth, both male and female, to address the problem of unintended pregnancies. Specific efforts should be made to include female youth who have had an early pregnancy but are not married in these interventions, especially female youth with disabilities.
- » Participants who gave birth in clinics and hospitals reported that they did not learn about contraception or family planning after birth. Family planning interventions should target young mothers, as well as those who are not married and their mothers, to destigmatize sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Family planning information should not be age or life stage dependent and should aim to expand options for women to choose whether and when to have children.
- » Female youth with disabilities have unique vulnerabilities and should be included in SRHR outreach and protection mechanisms against abuse, as a means of preventing unintended pregnancies in this population.
- » Female youth are often discouraged and at times prohibited from accessing school, due to official policy or unofficial local customs and norms. Despite these potential deterrents, returning to school after childbirth is possible and was common among study participants, despite dropping out of school during pregnancy. Home-based learning materials could be provided to female youth who are likely to leave school while pregnant in order to help prevent them from falling behind. Advocacy campaigns should target school administration and teachers to ensure that their biases and attitudes towards

pregnant learners and young mothers do not reinforce stigmatization around education. Childcare options (on or off school premises) could be considered for young mothers, as well options for flexible school hours.

- » Parents and caregivers are often reluctant to pay school fees after their daughters become mothers, claiming that the responsibility should be with the boyfriend. This can lead to girls stopping education earlier than desired. Conditional cash or incentives could be given to the natal family to encourage the schooling of young mothers to continue. Conditional cash, incentives, or school supplies could also be given to the female youth to support her child's entry into school upon reaching school age.
- » Stronger laws and protection mechanisms should be in place in communities to stop sexual exploitation of minors. Child rights organizations especially should strengthen their advocacy efforts to discourage relationships between significantly older men with underage female youth.
- » A large group of study participants reported that they had consensual intimate relations with age-mates. More research could be carried out to get a better understanding of the dynamics and gender relations in these relationships and implications for awareness raising and prevention of early pregnancy.

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