

# No Choice

It takes a world to end  
the use of child soldiers  
Country Case Study:  
**South Sudan**

**Developed by Child Frontiers for World Vision International. The opinions expressed by the authors do not necessarily reflect those of World Vision.**

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The names of all children quoted in this report have been changed to protect their identities.

## Brief country overview

During the 1983–2005 Second Sudanese Civil War thousands of children were used by all parties to the conflict, including the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which became South Sudan's official military after the 2005 peace deal and also saw its top commanders become South Sudan's political elite.

The most recent conflict in South Sudan, beginning in December 2013, has had a severe impact on children, with an estimated 19,000 children associated with fighting forces and groups – the largest number across Africa (UNICEF 2018). Both the government armed forces, the SPLA, termed the South Sudan Peoples Defense Force (SSPDF) in September 2018, and rebel groups such as the Sudan People's Liberation Army-in Opposition (SPLA-IO), South Sudan National Liberation Movement (SSNLM) and other non-state actors have recruited children (UN Security Council 2018). The practice of child recruitment in South Sudan is geographically widespread and the country's protracted crisis complex, made up of various forces and numerous militias supporting the opposition.

Before the current conflict began, multiple efforts that had relative success were under way to end child recruitment in South Sudan. Thousands of children were released from the SPLA and other armed groups after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. The post-2005 Southern government passed legislation criminalising the recruitment and use of anyone under the age of 18 years in armed conflict and signed an agreement with the UN to work to end child recruitment. The SPLA set up a Child Protection Unit to monitor barracks, help release children associated with fighting forces, and hold abusive commanders to account. Formal release of children has followed peace deals ending insurgencies in more recent years. Furthermore, efforts to reduce military use of schools by clearing them of soldiers in different parts of the country had been successful.

The outbreak of new conflict in December 2013, however, reversed much of the progress made, and the recent conflict shows that when fighting begins, using children to boost forces remains a low cost and attractive tactic. The practice

of forced recruitment by way of abduction has a secondary impact of creating significant fear among communities and can be used as a tactic to help an armed group concentrate its geographic control.

Many children in South Sudan fight as part of locally organised armed groups or community defence forces tasked with protecting their home areas rather than in formal forces. Both the government and the opposition have formed alliances, based on ethnic ties or opportunism, with local defence forces (Human Rights Watch 2017).

The Transitional Constitution of South Sudan (2012) defines a child as anyone under the age of 18 and specifies that every child has the right 'not . . . to be required to serve in the army'. South Sudan's Child Act (2008) also defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. This law protects children from 'service with the police, prison or military forces' and clearly states that the 'minimum age for conscription or voluntary recruitment into armed forces or groups shall be eighteen years' and that 'no child shall be used or recruited to engage in any military or paramilitary activities, whether armed or un-armed, including but not limited to work as sentries, informants, agents or spies, cooks, in transport, as labourers, for sexual purposes or any other forms of work that do not serve the interests of the child.' This law also explicitly lays out penalties for recruitment or use of a child in armed forces of 'imprisonment for a term not exceeding ten years or with fine or with both.' Under South Sudan's SPLA Act (2009) a person has to be 18 years of age or older to be eligible for enlistment. In September 2014, the Office of the Legal Advisor of the Ministry of Defence recommended an addition to the SPLA Act, setting out possible punishments for child recruitment and occupation of schools and hospitals. The amendment is currently with the Ministry of Justice and has not yet been voted on by South Sudan's Legislative Assembly. Its inclusion into the SPLA Act could technically help strengthen the Child Protection Unit, the Military Justice Unit and others to investigate and prosecute those who recruit children, but only if there is adequate political support from the most senior levels of the army and government (Human Rights Watch 2017).

# Overview of children who join armed groups and forces

## A note on terminology

A child is defined, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as any person under the age of 18. However, a number of qualitative research studies (for example, de Vise-Lewis, Schwarz, et al 2017) highlight that community perspectives on children and childhood can vary and are rarely associated with age but rather demarcated by physical developmental changes, behavioural changes and actions, such as emotional and financial independence, undertaking household chores, caring for younger siblings, getting married and having children. In an effort to understand motivations behind children's voluntary recruitment and strategies to help prevent it, differing contextual understandings and perspectives on childhood need to be considered.

There is much debate around what constitutes voluntary recruitment. For the purposes of this research it is defined as someone joining of his or her own free will, without being physically forced or coerced. However, what constitutes free will or choice is debateable, and the line between real choice, perceived necessity for survival and coercion is often blurred. Some of the literature notes that it may be a 'choice', but one among a highly constrained set of options based on what people consider to be the best available means of finding a way to survive, and/or to protect oneself and one's family (Child Soldiers International 2018).

## Who is joining fighting forces?

According to the literature, mostly boys between 14–15 years old are recruited by armed groups in South Sudan. Boys younger than 14 years also join but are generally not combatants, instead taking on roles such as cooks or bodyguards for commanders (Human Rights Watch 2018). The literature notes that girls are also associated with armed groups both through forced and voluntary recruitment; however, there is little information on numbers, how they join and what their roles are, or if they share the same motivations and drivers as boys. Key informant

interviews found that girls are forcibly recruited through abduction for marriage, sexual purposes, bearing children or performing domestic duties, often with most of these reasons presenting as some factor. Where girls' recruitment may appear to be 'voluntary', this can be due to an arranged marriage by a girl's parents where marriage provides the parents with an economic benefit of receiving a dowry and can be perceived to increase safety or protection for the girl and her family. A girl may herself see early marriage as a means to protect herself or her family, or to provide for her family, so entrenched and prolific is the practice of girl child marriage in South Sudan.

Many boys who are recruited in the current conflict grew up in violence, especially in rural areas where access to quality education and other opportunities is especially low. It is generally acknowledged that children from the poorest families and communities are more likely to be recruited (Human Rights Watch 2018).

In Yambio, an area in the southwestern part of South Sudan, large formal releases of children associated with armed actors or groups took place. Of the over 700 children supported in this release, 30 per cent were girls. The median age range of boys at age of joining was 12–15 years, and for girls, 11–15 years.

## How are they joining?

The literature highlights widely different experiences of children being recruited and deployed; both forced and voluntary recruitment are prevalent in South Sudan (though respective percentages are not known). Forced recruitment is described as children being physically forced onto trucks bound for battles or training camps, children being arrested and put in detention facilities until they agree to fight, or children being abducted at gun point and taken from their home areas by forces or groups. Several studies indicate children 'choosing' to join armed groups is also a common feature in the South Sudan context for a variety of reasons as described below.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Around one-third of the boys that Human Rights Watch interviewed who had fought in the recent conflict were forcibly, violently recruited; however, the remaining two-thirds were voluntary recruits.



## Why are children ‘choosing’ to join?

### Perceptions of childhood and adulthood

Initiation is an important feature of South Sudanese tribal culture, particularly in the Dinka and Nuer tribes. In those tribes boys are considered to transcend from childhood to adulthood, making them men in the eyes of their communities before they are 18, together with other members of their age set.

On both sides, boys, especially those 14–15 years of age or older, who form the majority of children associated with fighting forces in South Sudan, are generally treated more or less the same as adult soldiers. They are usually perceived by themselves and within their communities as able warriors (Human Rights Watch 2018).

From World Vision's work with released female child soldiers, perceptions of childhood and adulthood fed into the reason for joining as well. Of the caseload, almost all girls were forcibly married to their military commanders; the customary age for marriage and perception of adulthood are understood for girls to be at the age of menstruation. The widespread practice of polygamy, this understanding of ‘adulthood’ for females, and the interpretation that having many wives is a demonstration of wealth and power fuel this intersection of female recruitment and early/forced marriage. This can be ‘forced’ by the armed actors, a coercive ‘choice’ by the parents of the girl, or a ‘choice’ by the girl herself; it is common to view marriage as a means of income for parents’ because of dowry practices or a means of protection for the girl.

These local constructions of childhood and adulthood are at odds with those of international agencies and are also noted to pose significant challenges to preventing recruitment and developing effective reintegration programmes. An emphasis on ‘victimhood’ is a common feature of advocacy efforts aimed at ending child recruitment; this approach stands in stark contrast with local perceptions of young men and women as capable actors (Ensor 2013).

### Safety and security

The need for protection due to insecurity is considered a significant driver for joining armed forces and groups in South Sudan (Human Rights Watch 2018; Skåras 2017; Ensor 2013; Graham 2015). Adolescent boys in particular are perceived by themselves and others within the community as having a duty to protect their families, community and cattle, especially in

Dinka and Nuer communities. In the face of frequent danger and a grossly abusive conflict, being part of an armed group is perceived to afford personal and family protection – and an opportunity to survive the conflict. Without the protection of a gun or an armed group, many children believe they are more vulnerable to being killed because of their ethnicity or assumptions about their allegiances. Many children are also described as voluntarily joining armed groups to provide an opportunity to fulfil their desire for revenge for attacks or abuses.

Boys associated with armed groups are not generally stigmatised in South Sudan, and although their loss of access to education is generally regretted, they are usually seen as valuable fighters, not victims, especially in rural communities (Human Rights Watch 2017). This stigma can depend on the type of role a child played during the conflict. World Vision has found a greater stigma is attached to a child who was responsible for intelligence gathering or acting as a ‘spy’, resulting in violent guerrilla-style attacks. This is due, in part, to residual fear by family members or community that the child may continue this in the future. While more research is required, operational experience from World Vision found further that girls formerly associated with armed groups in Yambio are heavily stigmatised. In a context where survivors of gender-based violence experience stigma, the intersection of a recruitment experience and gender-based violence for most girls compounds their trauma. Aspects of stigma include surviving sexual violence, being the ‘wife’ of a commander, and often becoming a single adolescent mother. While most of these sources of stigma cannot be a deterrent for prevention, the stigma of forced marriage or early pregnancy could be a deterring factor to influence parents and family member who actively arrange this circumstance for their girls.

### Lack of access to education

One of the most frequently cited push factors for voluntary recruitment is lack of access to education. Many schools have been destroyed, especially in opposition-held areas, and even where schools remain they are notably understaffed and the quality of education is described as poor. South Sudan's government ended payment of salaries for teachers (and civil servants) in opposition-held areas soon after the conflict began; in government-controlled areas there have been insufficient funds to pay teacher's salaries, resulting in an almost complete dependence on international aid budgets. The result of this, and the conflict itself, has been a dramatic reduction in access to schooling and quality education.

In addition, schools are also often used by soldiers or armed actors as places to live. School structures are some of the few permanent buildings in towns and villages, making them especially attractive to soldiers who often have not been

provided with adequate shelter. As a result, across South Sudan, including in non-conflict areas, the use of schools by soldiers and other forces such as police is common and has been for decades.

## Poverty

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Though a poor nation before 2013, the civil war brought economic collapse, soaring inflation, closure of bank institutions and stalling of many employment opportunities. In South Sudan many children join armed groups in order to satisfy social and economic needs for themselves, or their families. In the wreckage of the conflict some children joined to access food or money. Poverty and a general lack of access to services (including, but not limited to education) is noted as hampering successful reintegration of demobilised children and ultimately leading to cycles of re-recruitment (Skåras 2017). The perceived promise of security-sector reform,

including monetary payment or incentives, has been a post-2018 peace agreement factor contributing to recruitment or re-recruitment.

## Why are some children in similar circumstances not joining?

While it is evident that the challenges mentioned above contribute to children's recruitment into armed groups, it is less apparent why children in similar circumstances do not join. For example, poverty or lack of access to education are considered significant push factors, yet not all children who are poor or out of school join armed groups. The literature does not reflect on this consideration. This is an area that would benefit from additional research to better understand the complexities of these multiple push and pull factors and inform programme priorities and interventions.



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# Overview of prevention strategies

There is emerging understanding within the Children Associated with Armed Actors and Groups Working Group that prevention of recruitment and of recidivism can be supported by strengthening community-based child protection mechanisms, including building capacity of parents, caregivers, teachers, youth leaders, faith actors, community leaders and existing community groups to understand and promote children's rights, monitor concerns for children and partner together to report and refer protection concerns. The literature emphasises access to education and to a lesser degree availability of employment opportunities as the main means to prevent recruitment and re-recruitment of children into armed groups in South Sudan (Human Rights Watch 2017; Skåras 2017; Ensor 2013; Graham 2015).

Currently the majority of programming related to child recruitment is focused on reintegration of children associated with armed groups. Some agencies are working with the government and opposition groups to advocate for the release of children in armed groups and enforcement of legislation to prevent recruitment of children. In World Vision's Children Associated with Armed Actors and Groups reintegration programme, a priority is placed on addressing the complex protection concerns and needs of released children, including the harm caused by recruitment, on an individual care basis. Reintegration includes provision of interim care for unaccompanied or separated children or children with an unsafe home environment; family tracing

and reunification or identification of alternative care including fostering arrangements; comprehensive case management by assigning each child a dedicated social worker; psychosocial support including one to one counselling; provision of basic personal care items; reenrolment in primary, secondary or accelerated learning programmes and payment of school fees; and provision of vocational training, apprenticeship or skills training for older children. World Vision also supports referral to medical and mental healthcare, nutrition services, and specialised services for children living with disabilities. To support reintegration and prevent re-recruitment, World Vision has emphasised social reintegration, focusing on rebuilding relationships and trust amongst the children, their parents and extended families, and their communities.

Very little documentation exists in terms of what communities, families and children are doing to prevent recruitment of children. However, several documents note the perceived importance of access to education and other services as critical in mitigating recruitment both in terms of the child being less likely to seek voluntary recruitment and armed groups not seeking to recruit the child (Graham 2015). Addressing factors that cause re-recruitment of children through access to education, livelihood opportunities and ability to meet basic needs are argued to be critical in reducing the likelihood of recruitment or re-recruitment (Human Rights Watch 2017; Kimball 2016; Skåras 2017; Ensor 2013; Graham 2015).

## Concluding remarks

The findings from the literature review demonstrate that significant numbers of children are associated with armed groups in South Sudan. While percentages of children joining 'voluntarily' as opposed to children subjected to forced recruitment are not known, voluntary recruitment is reported to be a significant phenomenon in South Sudan, with the caveat that 'voluntary' is almost always the least bad of many life-threatening alternatives. This conception of 'voluntary' applies more to recruitment of boys, however, and further research is recommended into this dynamic for girls.

A higher number of boys are noted to be associated with armed groups, while less is known about girls' association – including numbers, how they join, what their roles are and if they share the same motivations and drivers as boys. The cultural context of polygamy, dowry, early/forced marriage practices and gender-based violence against women and girls, and the research done on this in South Sudan, will be essential to better understanding prevention of and response to girl recruitment, recognising the intersection from operational evidence in World Vision programming. Understanding the different experiences of boys and girls will be critical in developing effective and gender-sensitive prevention strategies and re-integration initiatives.

Push factors for joining armed groups are often multifaceted and complex, including lack of access to services – especially education, ongoing insecurity and the perceived protection afforded by being part of an armed group and/or poverty. Combined, these factors result in armed groups often becoming one of the only perceived options available to children for meeting basic needs and survival. In extensive parts of South Sudan push and pull factors also need to be considered within the context of social norms and perceptions of childhood which ultimately influence decision making and what is perceived as acceptable by children, families and communities. This is an important consideration in developing contextually relevant and appropriate prevention strategies and reintegration programmes.

There is a considerable gap in information on reasons why some children in similar circumstances choose not to join armed groups while others do, as well as on preventive strategies at the family and community level. These are both areas that warrant further investigation in order to better understand the multiple drivers and complexities, and more effectively inform the focus of programme priorities and interventions.



# Summary recommendations

No armed actor should recruit children, and no boy or girl under the age of 18 should see joining an armed force or armed group as his or her only or best option. It is therefore imperative to work together to change practices in armed forces and armed groups, prioritise the rights and protection of children and reduce the factors making children vulnerable to recruitment by committing to action on the following:

- All armed forces and armed groups must prohibit the recruitment of children under the age of 18 in policy and practice. This includes appropriate national legislation and its enforcement.
- Effectively and sufficiently resource child protection, education and social protection services in national budgets and prioritise the protection of children from grave violations in national policy.
- Recognise prevention and response to grave violations against children as a life-saving intervention and dramatically increase funding for child protection in conflict settings, including long-term funding for both prevention of and response to violence against children.
- All donors and humanitarian actors should mainstream a systems approach to child protection across funding mechanisms and programmes with the aim of protecting children from the six grave violations identified by the United Nations as well as other violations of their rights.
- Prioritise the participation and empowerment of children and young people in peacebuilding and community life, in programme design and evaluation and in global discussions on issues affecting them.

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'Grace,' a former child soldier, learns sewing skills for a new livelihood in a World Vision supported vocational training school.

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