

## What's driving the sky-high child marriage rates in South Sudan

Written by Katrina Lee-Koo, Senior Lecturer in International Relations, Monash University

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Last month, a Sudanese court sentenced a 19-year-old woman to death for killing her husband who had repeatedly raped her. The prosecution of [Noura Hussein](#), forcibly married at the age of 16, has triggered global outrage and drawn attention to the millions of girls worldwide who are married against their will.

A high-profile campaign has been initiated to overturn Hussein's death sentence, with celebrities such as Naomi Campbell, Emma Watson, and former Australian Prime Minister [Julia Gillard](#) lending their support

The Sudanese court's decision to apply the death penalty in the case is shocking. However, the practice of child forced marriage is putting the lives of millions of adolescent girls at risk around the world. [One in five girls worldwide](#) is estimated to be married before the age of 18, [including even in parts of the United States](#)

Not only are these girls often left isolated from their families and support networks, they face a greater risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and experiencing dangerous complications in childbirth. They are also much more likely to experience domestic violence and be taken out of school. Often, they are married to much older men and with limited economic opportunities are more likely to live in poverty.

### Child forced marriage in South Sudan

Rates of child forced marriage are exacerbated by conflict and crisis, which have been particularly pronounced problems in [South Sudan](#), the nation that split from Sudan in 2011 following decades of debilitating war. [Conflict has continued nearly unabated since then](#), displacing millions of people and causing widespread food shortages.

The minimum legal age for marriage in South Sudan is 18. This is set out in the [transitional constitution](#) and [the Child Act of 2008](#)

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. The minimum age limit is much higher than in neighbouring [Sudan](#), which allows a girl to marry with a parent's permission at just 10 years of age.

Despite the laws in South Sudan, however, [UNICEF](#) estimates 52% of girls are married there before their 18th birthday, the fifth-highest rate of child marriage in the world. (In Sudan, the rate is 34%.)

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Adolescent pregnancy frequently follows early marriage, as well. [At 158 births per 1,000 women](#) aged 15-19, South Sudan has one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in the world. Combined with one of the world's worst [maternal mortality rates at 789 deaths per 100,000 live births](#), early marriage has dire consequences for adolescent girls.

### Drivers of early and forced marriage

As part of a recent study between [Plan International and Monash GPS](#), we conducted research with adolescent girls in South Sudan and in refugee camps in northern Uganda. We found that there are numerous and overlapping drivers for forced child marriage in South Sudan.

The current food crisis and economic downturn means that the collection of a bride price makes early and forced marriage a viable – yet negative – coping mechanism for families. One of our research participants, a member of civil society in the capital, Juba, remarked “with this current situation some parents take their girls as assets, which are sold expensively, so in most cases most parents sell off their daughters for money.”

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In Nimule, another noted “Due to the conflict, most of the parents are forcing their girls to get married so that they can get money to survive in this current situation.”

We found family separation increased the risk of early and forced marriage. Many adolescent girls who, due to the ongoing conflict, are separated from their parents and residing with extended family, are far more vulnerable to forced marriage. This is primarily driven by male relatives such as uncles and cousins.

We also found that once married, girls nearly never return to school. One of the adolescent girls we interviewed told us: “The future is not good at all ... many girls will end up getting married as a means of survival.”

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But forced child marriage cannot be explained simply as a transactional arrangement for families to secure resources to survive. Its prevalence results from an interplay of factors, including entrenched gender inequality, harmful gender norms, continued conflict and communal violence, and limits on the agency and decision-making of adolescent girls, all of which conspire to put them at risk.

In some instances, girls actively sought to mitigate the threat of forced marriage by engaging in small-scale livelihood activities such as collecting firewood or selling goods in the market, or showing their value to their family and community through educational performance and household labour.

## Efforts to address the forced marriage of children

Putting an end to child forced marriage in South Sudan and other countries requires addressing all the drivers of this practice, such as poverty and food insecurity, limited access to resources,

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sustainable livelihoods and education, and lack of sexual and reproductive healthcare.

At the same time, humanitarian actors must work with the community to address the lack of awareness on the rights of girls and the legal frameworks in place to uphold them.

Waiting until another adolescent girl is on trial for murder is too late.

*Katrina Lee-Koo receives funding from Plan International.*

*Hannah Jay receives funding from Plan International*

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**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/whats-driving-the-sky-high-child-marriage-rates-in-south-sudan-97369>