

Separated children in south Sudan

by Una McCauley

Huge numbers of young people in south Sudan are growing up away from their parents. Research findings suggest many would rather live outside unsupportive family structures and that they are increasingly more dependent on each other for support and comfort than on adults.

War has skewed the demographic balance in south Sudan where children make up 53% of the population. Due to the large number of men who have either been killed or forced to migrate in search of work, females comprise 55% of the population. Women have had to take on a wide range of responsibilities that they did not have before the war, challenging family dynamics in a hierarchical male-dominated society.

As child-focused agencies in south Sudan have moved towards viewing the protection of vulnerable children more holistically it has become clear that there are significant cyclical

linkages between family separation, voluntary or involuntary, and vulnerability to recruitment, abduction, sexual exploitation and other horrors which characterise the lives of many young people in southern Sudan. Children who are separated from their original primary carers are more likely to leave subsequent carers due to ill-treatment and perceived lack of love and support. Concerns about the encroaching impact that HIV/AIDS will have on household structures have led to an increased interest in separated children and children without primary care givers. The potential movement of large numbers of IDPs and refugees from the North and from

neighbouring countries raises concern about children who may be left behind, or become separated prior to departure or while returning, as well as the impact that high numbers of returnees may have on family coping mechanisms.

There is a pressing need to better understand separation: who are they, how or why do they become separated, what are their choices, what coping mechanisms do children, their families, carers and communities employ and how do they perceive separation. UNICEF, Save the Children UK and Save the Children Sweden sought to answer these questions by talking to a small sample of children and adults in southern Sudan affected directly or indirectly by family separation.

How children get separated

There are many reasons why and how so many southern children have become separated from their families. Sometimes they are forced

to leave their homes due to fighting; at other times it is an informed decision on the part of the child and/or the family. There is anecdotal evidence that large numbers of children have become separated from their families due to attacks and other acts of war, military recruitment and labour migration but little in the way of documentation of family separation. The International Committee of the Red Cross has done some limited registration of war-separated children – mostly of those who fled in panic from aerial bombardments – but there has never been a systematic family tracing and reunification programme in south Sudan. This is in part due to cultural understanding and definitions of family separation and to whom children belong and the extent to which separated children are seen as economic assets to be absorbed into new families. Many communities do not consider that a child living within the extended family support system can be ‘separated’ as customary care practices allow a wide range of family and clan members to have responsibility for the child.

Military recruitment has been a significant cause of separation as all protagonists have used children in combat and support roles. Children reported that their decision to enlist was often voluntary – that they decided to escape difficult and abusive domestic situations or to seek revenge for the killing of loved ones. The SPLM used to recruit children and separate them from their families but also claims that their army

provided a safe and secure place for separated children with no-one else to care for them. Of some 16,000 children who were formally demobilised from the SPLA between 2001 and the end of 2003, more than two thirds were living away from their families. While their return has been relatively easy, this is not the case with other armed forces in the South, particularly GoS-backed militia who recruited children by force or promises of cash rewards.

Another high-profile group are children abducted, along with women and livestock, during raids by northerners or, less frequently, in the course of South-South inter-tribal raiding between the Dinka and Nuer and the Merle and the Nuer. Because much tribal raiding takes place in inaccessible areas there is no real understanding of the extent of the problem.

Labour migration has also caused significant separation. Within southern communities there is a reluctance to acknowledge movement to Khartoum or other areas controlled by the GoS. However, most families have relatives who have gone ‘North’ and the relationship between the ‘North’ and ‘South’ is a lot more fluid than most people in the south care to admit. The children who took part in the study who had been left behind when parents migrated were cared for in the extended family or clan.

Separation is also often the result of the traditional belief among Nilotic

tribes that early male separation from the family is part of the process of growing up. Neither the adult nor the child respondents in the research found the actual process of boys leaving home alarming. Young males have left home to look for a better education or life in the cash economy or refugee camps in neighbouring countries, voluntarily separating themselves from their families at a relatively early age. A UNICEF study of street children in Khartoum found that most were young male southerners, many of whom had opted to leave their families in the south in the hope of bettering themselves.

Among the different tribal groups of south Sudan, responsibility for caring for orphaned children or those who have lost their primary carers usually falls within the extended family, often to maternal relatives. However, after such protracted conflict and damage to livelihoods, families and communities are unable to cope with the increasing numbers of orphaned and separated children. Most adult respondents indicated that caring for separated children is an unwelcome burden, the weight of which falls almost entirely on women.

What young people say

The overall situation for children is bleak and the fact that so many children are becoming separated due to adverse conditions in their households and communities raises concerns about ‘quick-fix’ solutions to family separation. While many of the causes of separation are the same for children who become separated for the first time, the inadequate treatment of separated children in many instances leads to re-separation (or children leaving home to seek a better existence).

Voluntary separation is seen as an attractive option by very many young people. Children in all research communities highlighted the fact that separated children living within family units (be they extended family or foster families) are subject to abuse, discrimination and neglect by their carers, the community and other children. The majority of separated children interviewed said that they did not want to be re-unified with their families and argued that they had left home because their lives had



been worse. Unless improvements could be made at the household level they could see no reason to return.

Girls face worse conditions, especially in Northern Bahr El Ghazal and Western Upper Nile, where the option to leave is denied them and they are trapped in exploitative and abusive situations. Many report being sexually abused by members of their extended families and lacking anybody to turn to. Early marriage is not uncommon in many parts of southern Sudan but separated girls face the danger of being forced into marriage at an even younger age as this is a way for carer families to access the dowry and relieve themselves of the burden of caring for the child.

Being denied food is a major issue for separated children. Child interviewees gave details as to how separated children's carers would regularly deny them food and give preferential treatment to biological children. One chief in Western Upper Nile told of how people caring for separated children would often pretend that the child had "just eaten" when the child had not been fed for days.

All children expressed a strong belief that education was the only way that they could improve their situation. Many feel that adults put up barriers to their educational achievement. More boys leave home to look for education than girls. Having left home they often arrive at their destination only to be barred from attending classes because they cannot pay the fees. Girls are less likely to leave to seek education as it is not considered a priority by them or by their carers. And they are rarely given the opportunity to attend school anyway, even if a school is available.

All those interviewed mentioned domestic violence, gender-based violence and sexual harassment as causes of separation. Women reported that men disempowered by the war had lost status, had become brutalised by military life and returned to bully and harass their wives. Children said fathers were often so violent that their mothers left the home, leaving them alone with their fathers who would not take care of them and so they in turn would also be anxious to leave. In the aftermath of sexual violence out-

side the home, some women are no longer able to take care of their own children and end up leaving home.

Children are concerned about alcohol. The issue of parental alcohol abuse was mentioned by children in all communities as a major factor contributing to domestic abuse and neglect. "Alcoholism leads to mistreatment of children, especially girls sexually, which frustrates children and forces them to flee their homes," reported an adolescent girl in Western Equatoria. Separated children living in market towns or as child soldiers turn to alcohol for solace. Adults and children have noted an increase in the use of marijuana among boys and girls.

A child in Northern Bahr el Ghazal reported that "separated children are abused and overworked. They are left to look for their own food even when the father is still alive." Affection traditionally comes from mothers and not from fathers. While a child who still has a father may not be defined as a separated child it seems that many of them share the same feeling of being uncared for. Adult and child respondents stressed that a child whose mother had died was as badly off as a child with both parents dead. Widowed fathers have very little to do with a child's upbringing. In many cases, fathers meet their own food needs by going to a neighbour or relative's house but often do not provide cooked food for their own children and this is considered acceptable behaviour by adults.

Separated children often form small child-headed households. Children living in market towns in Northern Bahr El Ghazal described how they rely on each other for emotional and physical support. "Children help each other by sharing food, older boys protecting younger boys and girls from other boys who might harm them. They help each other with work like pounding sorghum, washing clothes and taking care of cattle."

Young people have a clear idea about what is good for them and they are able to make intelligent decisions about their lives. The decision of many separated children not to return to their homes unless there are significant improvements has to be recognised.

There is a clear sense of grievance among many children about the way they have been treated at home: denied education, used for work and, importantly, denied love and care. The children seemed to have a very clear idea of what they wanted from their parents and they consistently asserted in interviews that it was their right to receive love and emotional care from their parents as well as having their physical needs taken care of. If these rights were not being addressed then it was a good enough reason to leave home.

Researchers were surprised by the strength of opinion expressed by the children when interviewed about the impact an unhappy home has on their lives. Many children attribute separation to how badly children are treated in the family and how little love and affection they feel they receive. Girls described a 'good home' as one in which

- there is love
- there is food, in which each child gets an equal share
- no one insults you
- you look forward to being there at the end of the day
- people do things together
- there is no discrimination between children
- nobody talks about who is an orphan and who is not
- you are allowed to go to school.

Refocusing child protection

In recent years much of the attention of international agencies working in child protection has centred on activities with high-profile groups of children – for example, the demobilisation of children associated with the fighting forces and the return of abducted children and women from Government of Sudan (GoS) areas. The child protection sector in southern Sudan is small and under-resourced and more must be done to address the protection needs of the most vulnerable children, wherever and wherever they are.

It is important to:

- abandon romantic notions of the ever elastic and welcoming nature of extended families and host communities
- recognise the legitimacy of children's anger at the way they have been treated at home, denied

education, used for work and denied love and care

- prioritise support to girls
- realise that a tradition of leaving home may be normal and not try to impose family norms and standards which are unacceptable to male teenagers
- establish community-based family tracing activities and stan-

dardised models of follow up and community monitoring to assess how well protected separated and reunified children are and address their immediate protection concerns

- support community-based social work to find mechanisms to listen to what children and young people are saying and to help

adults recognise the dangers of inter-generational conflict and resentment.

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