

SUDAN


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for every child


A CRISIS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN



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 *Trigger warning: This publication contains information and descriptions related to violence against women and children, including sexual violence.*

 *Indicates a person's name has been changed to protect their identity.*



The devastating toll of sexual violence in Sudan

Sudan is in the clutches of a brutal conflict. 11 million people have been driven from their homes and tens of thousands have reportedly been killed. All parties to the conflict have been accused of abuses of human rights, including grave violations of children's rights.

The conflict has spawned a humanitarian crisis – famine, disease and displacement – that has grabbed headlines. But less often reported is the severe protection crisis, especially the widespread perpetration of sexual violence against children.

Over the following pages, UNICEF shares the voices of several courageous women and girls in an effort to increase the attention, protection and aid children in Sudan receive.

No person, no child, should have to endure these horrors. This must stop immediately.



We need to acknowledge the problem in Sudan. Yes, it's the war. Yes, it is the conflict. Yes, it's displacement, but more importantly, it's a protection crisis and at its heart it is a gender-based violence crisis. We have to acknowledge that.

The Executive Director of a Sudanese women-led organisation that provides services to survivors of gender-based violence.

The shape and scale of the problem

During this conflict, in less than two years, the number of people at risk of gender-based violence (GBV) has more than tripled to an estimated 12.1 million people, or 25 per cent of the population¹. According to UN Women, in the year to December 2024, the number of survivors of gender-based violence seeking services increased by 288 per cent².

There are no comprehensive statistics on sexual violence in Sudan but, according to the Human Rights Council's 'Report on the Independent International Fact Finding Mission for the Sudan'³, gender-based violence (GBV), especially rape, is widespread in active conflict areas. Perpetrators have primarily targeted women and girls but men and boys are not spared.

A UNICEF analysis of GBV data shared by service providers paints a searing picture. A total of 221 rape cases against children were recorded by the providers since the beginning of 2024. The youngest reported survivors were four one-year-olds.

While the sample size of the data is not extensive, it provides a helpful glimpse into the significant risks facing women and children. It also illustrates the critical need for additional investment in survivor-centred response services and safe, ethical systems for protecting survivor data⁴.

1 UN Sudan, December 2024. Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan. <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2025-executive-summary-issued-december-2024>

2 UN Women, December 2024. Gender Alert Press Release. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2024/12/ alarming-288-per-cent-rise-in-demand-for-gender-based-violence-services-in-the-last-12-months-in-sudan>

3 Findings of the investigations conducted by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan into violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, and related crimes, committed in the Sudan in the context of the conflict that erupted in mid-April 2023; <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session57/A-HRC-57-CRP-6-en.pdf>

4 UNICEF is committed to safe, ethical and respectful management of GBV survivor data, as outlined in the Interagency GBV Minimum Standards (p. 106) 19-200 Minum Standards Report ENGLISH-Nov 1.FINAL_.pdf

The data recorded 221 rape cases against children since the beginning of 2024. There are an additional 77 cases of sexual assault against children, primarily attempted rape cases.

Of the 221 child rape survivors, 147 children, or **66 per cent, are girls.**

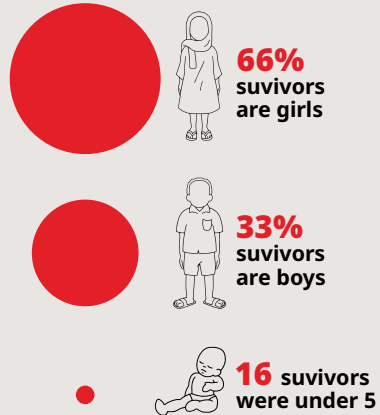
It is also important to note that **33 percent of survivors are boys.** This requires specific attention as they may face stigma and unique challenges in reporting, seeking help, and accessing services.

Shockingly, **16 child rape survivors were under 5 years of age,** including four one-year-olds.

The 221 child rape cases occurred **in nine states in Sudan,** from south to north and east to west.

221 RAPE CASES

AGAINST CHILDREN SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2024



In 2024, the number of documented grave violations against children in Sudan was 16 per cent higher than in 2023, which was already a 473 per cent increase from 2022⁵. Painstakingly verified by the United Nations, these figures provide only a partial picture of the true magnitude of violence inflicted against children. Among them, sexual violence is one of the least reported grave violations against children, often because survivors and their families are unwilling or unable to come forward due to challenges accessing services and frontline workers, fear of the stigma they could face, the fear of rejection from their family or community, the fear of retribution from armed groups or the fear of confidentiality breaches.

During December 2024 and January 2025, UNICEF documented dozens of first-hand accounts of gender-based violence in Sudan, including cases involving child sexual violence survivors, including:

- during invasions of cities, especially during raids on people's homes
- while fleeing danger
- while being held against their will, often in houses
- while in detention
- during trafficking across or outside the country for the purpose of sexual exploitation
- in exchange for food or other essential supplies
- during activities of daily living, such as fetching water or going to the market

⁵ Children and armed conflict in the Sudan Report of the Secretary-General, June 2024, <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2024/443>



“

After nine at night, someone opens the door, carrying a whip, selects one of the girls, and takes her to another room. I could hear the little girl crying and screaming. They were raping her. Every time they raped her, this girl would come back covered in blood. She is still just a young child. They only release these girls at dawn, and they return almost unconscious. Each of them cries and speaks incoherently. During the nineteen days I spent there, I reached a point where I wanted to end my life.” – Omnia, adult female survivor who was held by armed men in a room with other women and girls.*

The accounts encompass:

- rape, including gang rape and marital rape
- sexual assault, including attempted rape and sexual violence or abuse without penetration
- physical assault and killings, especially in combination with sexual violence and including against spouses, children and family members of survivors
- child marriage
- psychological or emotional abuse, including threats of violence, harassment and intimidation, especially at checkpoints and in combination with looting.

The accounts also detail sexual violence resulting in:

- significant psychological trauma
- social stigma, isolation and family rejection
- pregnancy
- sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and hepatitis
- serious physical injury, including wounds, fractures, abscesses, and other complications.

These are not rare occurrences or violations isolated to certain parts of Sudan. As is the case in many conflict settings, sexual violence in Sudan has often been used as a weapon of war during periods of conflict, according to the UN⁶, which found it has resurged again in this conflict, with atrocities occurring in cities and towns across the country.

Attacks reported to UNICEF and local service providers take many forms, including armed men storming homes and demanding at gunpoint that families surrender their girls, often while violently attacking the family members or raping the girls in front of their loved ones. Armed men reportedly threaten and violate children on their way out of cities, including while fleeing or crossing checkpoints. Girls have reported being repeatedly raped, often by several armed men one after another, especially after being abducted and held in houses. Girls, especially those who became pregnant because of rape, spoke about being rejected by their families and unable to return to their communities after the rape because of social stigma and community rejection.

⁶ Findings of the investigations conducted by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan into violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, and related crimes, committed in the Sudan in the context of the conflict that erupted in mid-April 2023; <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session57/A-HRC-57-CRP-6-en.pdf>

Sexual violence can have lifelong consequences for survivors and their families and leaves many with impossible choices in the wake of the violence, including whether to disclose it to family or community members, report it to authorities, how to handle a resultant pregnancy or seek out lifesaving services, including health services or mental health and psychosocial support.

“ The most horrifying experience is being subjected to rape... nothing left but tears. There is nothing else left. I remember this incident as if it happened yesterday.” *Faizah*, female adult survivor who was held in a house with other women and girls.*

The brutal reality of sexual violence – and the fear of falling victim to it - is pushing many women and girls to leave their homes and their families and flee to other cities. They often end up in informal displacement sites or communities with scarce resources. The risk of sexual violence in these settings is also high.

According to UNICEF global data⁷, in fragile situations including conflict-affected areas, the prevalence of rape and sexual assault in childhood is about two times higher than the global average. Unless the fighting stops, more and more children – especially girls – will be forced to endure horrific violations of their rights or flee to places where they remain unsafe and without safe access to services they need to survive.



⁷ UNICEF, *When Numbers Demand Action: Confronting the global scale of sexual violence against children*; October 2024; <https://data.unicef.org/resources/when-numbers-demand-action/>

Girls forced to become mothers



Mariam, a mother of two teenage girls, says her worst nightmares were realized when the conflict descended on their city. Their lives were forever changed in an instant.*

“They kidnapped the girls and kept them in captivity away from me. I tried with all my might to find my daughters, crying until I became seriously ill from the grief. But, despite all that, I couldn’t find my daughters.

“Months later, one of my neighbours ... told me that my daughters were fine, but armed men were raping them. Not one person, not two people, and the girls are suffering greatly. My little daughter tried to commit suicide by cutting her wrists... they beat my older daughter so badly that she vomited blood. They wouldn’t feed them, and they would force them to work 24 hours a day, cleaning, ironing, and more.”

After escaping the armed men, Mariam and her daughters fled to a new city. The eldest daughter, Yara, had internal injuries and required hospitalization and the family discovered both Yara and her sister were pregnant.*

“What happened is not her fault, so I have no reason to feel angry or resentful toward her,” Yara said of her baby just days after giving birth. “I didn’t plan for my baby’s future, how I would educate her, or whether she would be able to go to school... until now, I do not know what to do. I hope no girl in Sudan will have to endure what I went through.”

Out of the line of fire but vulnerable to harm

Conflict isn't only being perpetrated by armed groups. Firsthand accounts, especially from frontline workers, also report a rise in GBV perpetrated within the community against internally displaced persons (IDPs). These violations are occurring in shelters, informal IDP sites and within communities.

Displaced women and girls are increasingly vulnerable to sexual violence due to crowded living conditions in IDP sites, being housed by strangers or having no choice but to take long – often dark - walks to access essential services such as water points or toilets. Many of the women and adolescent girls living in these difficult circumstances were forced to flee alone, making them more socially and economically vulnerable because they cannot enjoy the 'protection' or economic support men are traditionally expected to provide in Sudan, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation or violence.

Sexual exploitation and abuse have also reportedly been perpetrated by those in positions of power within IDP sites, for example demanding sex in exchange for supplies or shelter. Older women, adolescent girls, and women and girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable in these circumstances.

This reality means many families are escaping conflict-related sexual violence only to face a new threat of violence in their supposedly 'safe' new community.



He found her alone in the house, he said to her, 'come with me, I will take you to your mother. He took her little brother too - she is five years old, and her brother is two and a half years old. He took them to a farm in a remote area and there he tried to rape my girl using a firearm.' - Adan said after she was displaced, a neighbour in the family's new community sexually assaulted her daughter Muna*.*



Stigma

As in many contexts, survivors, not perpetrators, carry the cultural blame of sexual violence in Sudan's patriarchal society. This can result in tremendous stigma, shame and ostracization from society for both male and female survivors, and their families.

Survivors spoke about being disowned by their husbands or fathers, and unmarried women and adolescent girls spoke of the fear of never being able to marry or return to their family homes because of social stigma. Other survivors spoke of not telling their families about what happened to them and leaving their communities to hide pregnancies. Several girls spoke about wishing they had been killed instead of being raped because of the heavy burden of shame they carried. Some spoke of attempting suicide.

“

I don't want anything else. I just want to go back to my family.”

– Zeena, 17, was kidnapped from eastern Sudan and taken to the west of the country where she was raped by armed men. Her sister remains missing.*

This pervasive stigma can discourage survivors from reporting the crime or seeking lifesaving services. Ultimately this results in urgent needs going unmet as well as case numbers significantly underrepresenting the problem.

Frontline workers also suggest some survivors are afraid of the negative ramifications of reporting rape cases to service providers for fear of breaches in confidentiality or of being accused of being 'wives' or 'collaborators' of an armed group and being detained.

Women and girls who become pregnant due to rape face unique challenges. The social isolation they experience can have long term consequences for the well-being of themselves and their child, including affecting their employment prospects, their acceptance by family and the community or the child's access to services.

In some cases, these challenges result in babies being placed in foster family care or 'kafala' families, given up for adoption, or abandoned. One centre that provides temporary care for infants until foster families are arranged reported a record 77 children in their care in 2024, up from 64 children in 2023 and 29 in 2022. They said this was largely as a consequence of children being born out of rape.



They forced me into a big car. They took me to a place next to a railway, and three people raped me. I couldn't confront my family about what happened to me. I sat in the street until I got myself together, then I went inside. Now I'm nine months pregnant. I was about to commit suicide, that's what happened to me.

"All procedures are in place; the child will be taken immediately after birth and handed over [to another family]. I don't want them to take the baby from me, but it would be difficult to keep him with me... my father does not know that I got pregnant." - Tamara, 16 years old*



Support

Even after enduring the horrors of sexual violence, the challenges don't end for many survivors in Sudan. Reporting violations and getting support for sexual violence and other forms of GBV remains difficult due to the accessibility, availability and capacity of services, damage to service infrastructure from the conflict, social stigma, fear of confidentiality breaches, fear of retribution, the lack of electricity and connectivity, as well as insufficient humanitarian access to all parts of Sudan.

As a result, in the aftermath of such pain and brutality, many survivors are left with little or no medical and psychosocial support.

Further exacerbating the problem is the limited availability of resources, particularly funding, to scale up service coverage to hard-to-reach areas and train frontline workers for quality service delivery. The Sudan Gender-based Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR) is seeking \$US89 million in the 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) to support interventions for a projected 3.2 million people while the Child Protection Area of Responsibility is seeking \$US91 million budget to support 3.1 million children at risk of different forms of violence, including GBV. Both areas of work remain severely underfunded.

Despite incredibly challenging circumstances and scarce resources, Sudanese women are demonstrating immense solidarity, resilience and innovation to protect and provide for themselves, their families, and their communities. Sudanese women-led organisations have undertaken a heroic effort in supporting survivors with supplies and services and have achieved important reforms since the onset of the conflict to help survivors safely access services.

UNICEF is working in Sudan to reduce the risks of GBV, address underlying GBV drivers and social norms and support survivors – especially children - to access lifesaving medical, mental health, safety and referral services. UNICEF is doing this by:

- Providing community-based services, including GBV case management, mental health and psychosocial support and referral services in locations across Sudan
- Building the capacity of frontline workers including social workers, psychologists and medical professionals on safe referrals, safety audits and risk mitigation
- Establishing safe spaces and gender-sensitive 'confidential corners' that provide gender-based violence services for survivors
- Integrating gender-based violence services into health services at health centers and mobile clinics

- Delivering relevant medical supplies, such as post-exposure prophylaxis kits to prevent possible HIV infections
- Providing cash assistance to at-risk women and adolescent girls to help them meet their basic needs including medical services
- Working together with communities to address harmful social norms and practices through social and behaviour change. As a result, hundreds of thousands of community members have mobilized to promote non-violent practices in their local communities
- Establishing adolescent girls clubs that run advocacy, skill-building and empowerment sessions on GBV issues for adolescent girls

“ *We continue to focus on awareness and provide workshops... we aim to harness the energy of children to create a strong foundation for society, as they are the seeds of the future. If raised well, they will be the ones to rebuild Sudan after the war.”*
 – *Rayan*, frontline worker*

In this work, UNICEF and partners continue to make important strides to protect and support communities. However, challenges persist, including:

- Limited service points due to conflict-related destruction and access limitations
- Service provider shortages due to displacement, personal risks and economic conditions
- Constant changes in the conflict front and regular people movement forcing services and the humanitarian response to repeatedly relocate
- Survivors and their families being under constant threat, making them fearful of seeking out services

Call for Action

Time is running out to prevent Sudan's sexual violence crisis from continuing to impact children and have an inordinate and lasting negative legacy.

UNICEF CALLS ON ALL PARTIES TO THE CONFLICT TO:

Respect their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law to protect civilians, especially children.

- Gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, must end immediately
 - Sexual violence during conflicts is a war crime under international law. The use of sexual violence as a weapon of war can fall under several categories of war crimes, including rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, and forced pregnancy, among others
 - The Geneva Conventions and the Rome Statute of the ICC outline the prohibition of such acts in conflict settings, and they are considered grave breaches of human rights and international humanitarian law. Sudan signed the Rome Statute in 2000 but has not yet ratified it. As such, Sudan is not a State Party to the International Criminal Court (ICC).
 - Essential services facilities, infrastructure and service providers must be protected so their work can continue
- Humanitarian workers must be able to safely deliver lifesaving aid and services
- Families must be able to safely access the support they need. Timely access to services is life-saving, especially for survivors of sexual violence

UNICEF CALLS ON HUMANITARIAN ACTORS TO:

Support survivors with access to a comprehensive set of services

- Clinical care, psychosocial support and individual GBV case management for survivors to address the consequences of sexual violence and support healing
- Safe shelters, emergency cash and other measures to protect survivors who are at immediate risk of further harm
- Referral pathways across services that are safe, confidential and effective
- Access to legal advice and representation for survivors of all types of GBV

Mitigate the risk of GBV with targeted interventions together with women and girls to make them less vulnerable to GBV. This includes:

- Engaging, empowering and supporting the leadership of women and girls in programme design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation
- Conducting community-based safety audits and safety planning
- Distributing dignity kits containing targeted non-food items to help girls and women move safely through the community, promoting their health, mobility and protection.
- Establishing safe spaces for women and girls where they can safely and confidentially access information, support, services (such as group psychosocial services and individual case management).
- Making humanitarian systems and services safe, protective and responsive to the needs and rights of girls and women
- Ensuring clusters and partners mitigate GBV risks in humanitarian assistance programmes through implementation of the Interagency Standing Committee GBV guidelines.

Prevent GBV

- Deliver and support social norm interventions that transform harmful norms and behaviours, and promote healthy, safe and equitable ones.
- Support economic and social empowerment of women and girls by partnering with organizations that build their protective assets through financial literacy activities and linkages with livelihoods and vocational opportunities.

Build capacity

- Strengthen capacity for the delivery of services, training and supervision of staff in health, case management, psychosocial support
- Support humanitarian actors in applying minimum standards on GBV in emergencies
- Strengthen the availability of reliable and comprehensive statistics on sexual violence, especially perpetrated against children. Data on the issue must be improved to inform the humanitarian response and hold perpetrators accountable

UNICEF CALLS ON DONORS TO:

- Prioritize GBV as a lifesaving intervention, particularly in areas in and around active conflict
- Support expanding the provision of a comprehensive set of services for survivors



“We appeal to ... all the countries of the world to support Sudan, to stand by us and to stand with the Sudanese women who have been subjected to sexual assault and violence,” - Mother of an 8-year-old survivor of sexual violence.

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