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War-Trauma and Primary School Dropout: An Urgent Call for Intervention in Northern Bahr-El-Ghazal State, South Sudan

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Abstract: *In this paper, we examined the effect of trauma on school dropout among children in primary schools of Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal State, South Sudan. The study took a cross-sectional descriptive and analytical design. Using a sample of 140 respondents, data was obtained from 100 usable questionnaires collected from children's school dropouts. Using statistical program for social scientists (SPSS), the researchers tested and analyzed the hypothesis (War-trauma does not have a relationship with school dropout). The specific objectives of the study were: to determine the level of war-trauma among school dropout children, to assess the level of school drop-out, to establish the influence of war-trauma on school dropout in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal State primary schools. War-trauma was found to influence school dropout. Study findings based on Standardized Coefficients (beta) present that, lack of state security is significant at b = 0.283 (28.3%) and lack of basic needs contributes less at b = 0.177 (17.7%) to school dropout. Death of parents was surprisingly found not significant. These revelations present the urgency of peace and peace building but also child-safety as priority for nation building and human capital development through avenues of trauma informed mental health safety and education chances for better livelihood of South Sudan. Trauma-informed interventions in South Sudan should integrate protection services, economic empowerment, and gender-sensitive care to support conflict-affected women and girls. Community-based MHPSS, trauma-awareness programmes, and peer support groups can strengthen resilience, healing, and social reintegration. Schools should function as safe spaces through trauma-informed education, psychological first aid, recreational activities, teacher training, and early identification of trauma-related distress among learners.*

Keywords: *War-Trauma, Death of parents, Basic Needs, State security, School Dropout*

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1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right (UDHR, 1948). "It is important for sustainable development, peace and stability within and among the countries. Education remains indispensable and effective avenue for participation in society and economy (The Dakar Framework for action (2000). However, the right to Education for All (EFA) in South Sudan has been under threat due to continued high rate of educational attrition (Zhao & Hartwell, 2006).

The world's youngest nation in her educational policies and plans has laid great emphasis upon the promotion and universalization of primary education (providing tuition,

teachers, infrastructure and instructional materials) but with small success towards her goal. The number of school dropout in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal State remains very high with a rate average of 52.3% (Sabates et al., 2010; Sebates et al., 2016). While continuous wars and torture might be indicative of nations' development gaps (Pettersson & Öberg., 2020; Tai., 2025), the situation is assumed to be associated with primary school dropout.

According to UNESCO, (2017) and Mayai., (2022) between 2013 and 2014, Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state registered a dropout rate of 25.9% of the 3,565 enrolled in P.7 and 25.2% between 2015 and 2017. Studies among South Sudanese refugees have found high levels of trauma and trauma associated mental disorders (Lindert, 2018; Tutlam et al., 2024). Specifically, the prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders, here after (PTSD), depression, and anxiety have been found to be as high as, 48%, 59%, and 26%, respectively in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state.

In Sub-Saharan Africa countries under war, mental health disorders are major public health threats to the region (Tutlam et al., 2024) with spillover to children who have not directly experienced any war-trauma having a relatively higher prevalence of emotional and behavioral problems (Geltman, 2005*)*. Simply put, the overwhelming majority of South Sudanese have been affected by war-trauma. As a result, quality education is at stake, not only due to the direct effects of fighting, but also because schools, teachers, students and staff are often targeted by violent attacks.
Researchers about African conflicts Damtew & Ejigu., (2022), Mugisho, (2024) assert that, the nature of attacks on schools were characterized with torture, abduction and rape of teachers, students, aid workers by armed military forces. These potentially culminate into forced recruitment of child soldiers causing a lot of psychological upheavals (Mugisho, 2024). Such happenings in many incidences translated into the death of teachers and students. These disturbing events scared away children. Trauma associated with the learning environment; including the destruction of infrastructure in hard to bear with. Efforts to improve pupils' progression are critical to achieve the SDG 4 and 5 on completing a full course of primary schooling by 2030.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Children in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state, South Sudan, face major challenges; enduring the psychological burden of war-trauma, which critically undermines their access to and engagement with primary education. Despite the undeniable importance of schooling not only as a coping strategy but also for individual and societal recovery from post-conflict situations, the direct mechanisms through which war-related trauma contributes to educational attrition remain inadequately understood. Existing research highlights a high prevalence of mental health issues among conflict-affected populations in South Sudan (Ayazi et al., 2014, Ayazi et al., 2012; Roberts et al., 2009) and general academic disruption due to conflict (Mayai, 22022; Erdal et al., 2024. However, localized empirical data quantifying the prevalence of war-trauma symptoms among primary school children and clearly linking these traumatic experiences to school dropout rates in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state is limited.

The lack of precise, contextualized data hinders the development of effective interventions. Without a clear understanding of the specific war-related factors that drive children out of schools in this region, efforts to support educational continuity and address mental health needs may prove insufficient or misdirected. This study sought to bridge this critical knowledge gap, providing essential understandings into the severity of war-trauma and school dropout and expounding their relationship to advocate for more targeted and impactful humanitarian and educational programming. Failure to address this fundamental problem risk perpetuating cycles of illiteracy, poverty and vulnerability, thereby undermining the long-term prospects for peace and development in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state and South Sudan as a whole.

1.2 General Objective

The purpose of this study was to establish the effect of war-trauma on primary school dropout from primary schools in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal State South Sudan.

Specific Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To determine the prevalence of war-trauma symptoms among primary school-aged children in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state.
2. To establish the primary school dropout rate among children in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state.
3. To identify specific war-related factors that significantly predict primary school dropout in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state.

2. Literature Review

It is an incontestable fact that poverty alleviation and the progress of a nation is highly dependent on educating the citizens. Hoffman et al., (2017) emphasized that education plays a central role and has a cross-cutting impact on all aspects of human life. Education stands as a vital investment for human and economic development. Leaving school without completing a certain level of education defies national pursuit for better statesmen (Latif et al;

2015). For the case of South Sudan, war-trauma should be investigated as a possible retreading condition against such achievements.

According to DSM-V, (2013) "trauma is a psychological disorder that results from an event or series of events experienced physically or emotionally with harmful or threatening impact to individuals' cognition. Trauma may have lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being".

Many people, especially children in South Sudan, are affected due to different situation related to conflicts and trauma manifestations. Punamäki et al., (2015); Höhne et al., (2022) and Mugisho, (2024) pointed out that children presented with symptoms commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression—having nightmares, getting angry easily, feeling unable to concentrate, and considering suicide. Common behaviors like difficult to be kind and maintain relationship with friends, someone talking or crying alone, children practice modeling guns and wearing old throne army uniforms claiming to be soldiers are a few observations pointing at war-trauma rumination (Punamäki et al., 2015; Höhne et al., (2022). Common after effects; lacking basic needs, being orphaned and dwindling state security may devastate the situation. These known assessment parameters are informative though individual qualities and happenings that befall the children under actual war situations deserve attention.

2.1 Lack of Basic Needs and School Dropout

Obstinately, Chimombo et al; (2005) and Mugisho, (2024) argued that the governments strived to reduce poverty and improve the lives of their people, they looked at education as the vehicle for achieving these objectives, but lack of basic need has caused massive school dropout in primary school.

While education attrition is a global challenge, high resourced nations may approach it from low quality of education and the learning environment aspects (Balfanz & West, 2008; Mehrota, 1998; Rumberger, 2011; Mugisho., 2024 and Azzam., 2017 while Kunje et al., (2014) approached this concern from the perspective of low resourced states being challenged by resource constraints at the household level and ineffective state politics.

According to Saavedra, (2015), Gertler, (2015) and Downey & Crummy (2022) lack of basic needs is the most traumatic event in a child's life. This reduces reserves in children's future capital; it presents with long-lasting implications for their quality of life and livelihood. Although reports by UNICEF (2024) and National institute of health (2024) noticed that a proportion of school going children in less industrialized nations have always lacked basic needs to support them, shortages due to war-trauma present with multiple faces.

Shadreck, (2013) demonstrated that as far as problems of school dropout is concerned, lack of basic needs is symptomatic to lack of community participation and sensitizing communities about the importance of schooling while trying as much as possible to reduce the opportunity cost associated with schooling. Contrarily, Ajaja, (2012) and Jones et al., (2022) the innovative approaches need to be developed in such a way that they can help overcome problems associated with financial constraints and lack of basic needs in order to prevent school dropout. The major concern in basic education is ensuring that learners are kept in school until they complete their education.

According to Kunje et al., (2014) absence of basic needs left massive children outside school and even affecting those that were in schools. In deciding to send children to school, parents face a trade-off between household consumption and children expected future income. Where choices surface the opportunity costs of keeping children in school supersede the alternatives for immediate household needs where children work for household survival. Similarly, World Bank, (2014) noted that the role of opportunity costs in the generation of demand for schooling has underwatered.

Shocking cases are happening in many African countries. Kadzamira & Rose, (2003) noted that in some African countries like Malawi, many children begin working at very early ages and are not enrolled in school at all. They spent their time working on the estate farms, in family fields and with herds or on the lake. In Zambia, parents, unable to spare children from rural household chores, withdrew or kept them away from school during important seasonal events like harvest and fishing due to lack of basic needs. Hoffman et al., (2017) emphasized that the establishment of neighborhood schools in Nigeria, appeared to have been an effective answer to the problem of rural parents who wanted to be compensated for the loss of their children's labor on the farm as the child is available after school hours to go and work for family needs.

Deficiency of basic needs is sensitive for female learners. In societies with strong culture, mobility restrictions arise when girls reach puberty (UNESCO, 2017) making the effect to be more on girls' retention at home than on entry into school schedules. Similarly, Sabates et al., (2016) confirmed that in some tribes in Africa, as soon as a girl reaches puberty, she is taught the wisdom of her society in order to maintain and develop it. These instructions are considered directly relevant to a girl, preparing her for life as a wife and mother in a village.

Shadreck, (2013) elaborated that students who withdraw from school prematurely end up not obtaining any certificate of graduation. Associated social costs include reduced political participation, increased crime rates and low levels of health which may result in reluctance to provide basic needs to the next generation. Individual costs include lower earnings, unemployment prospects, and greater likelihood of health problems that are associated with inadequacies to provide required necessities culminating into school dropout. Likewise, Rolnick & Grunewald, (2016) opined that it is clear from the foregoing, that by dropping out of school, most students severely limit their chances of economic and social well-being in the future.

Mayai., (2022) strongly stated that schools attended by students have the sole responsibility and task of reducing dropout rates. Lack of basic needs might demonstrate as one of those factors, but the school foundation also matters. Likewise, Azzam, (2017) asserted that many dropouts would have attended schools that have poor facilities and inadequate resources, conditions that affect the performance of the children and ultimately their decision to leave school. Therefore, if parents are to keep students in schools, the quality of education should matter most.

A study done by Rani, (2011) found out that lack of basic needs for the students is associated with financial difficulties, that makes a child not to get interested in studies, lack of education facilities in the nearby village, lack of quality education, imposition of parents' choices upon adolescents, lack of privacy, and toilet facilities for girls in school and security reasons for dropping out were emphasized. Similarly, Shadreck, (2013) noted that in Pakistan, the weak primary education system, non-availability of trained teachers, and weak parent-teacher relationship have major bearing on school dropouts. Centrally, in the USA, school dropout is associated with lack of interesting classes and spending a lot of time with those not interested in school as well as reluctance of parents and participation in domestic activities.

Mugisho, (2024) agrees that lack of basic needs and early marriages affect girls more especially in their performance and progress hence leading to dropout in primary schools. Women with low education have challenges such as lack of union experience and resources to take care of their children. The husband becomes the sole breadwinner, and the amount of pressure on him increases as the family expands. The results are agitation within the family, leading to battery and divorce.

2.2 Death of Parents and School Dropout

While existing studies have examined trauma, grief, and institutional collapse, few have explicitly connected the death of a primary caretaker during war to school dropout trajectories. Steinberg (2022) in his research highlights that children experiencing death as trauma require relational treatment approaches, and Nader (2022) emphasizes systemic responses to traumatic grief. These perspectives underscore the emotional burden of caretaker loss but do not extend to its educational consequences. A study about death of parents and school dropout fills a critical gap by linking psychological trauma to educational disengagement.

Steinberg, (2022) and Nader, (2022) stated that one of the most traumatizing events a child can experience is the death of a parent but Hazer & Gredebäck, (2023) and Mugisho, (2024) emphasized that it is more disturbing when circumstance relate to war-trauma. The loss of a parent causes emotional distress and deprives the orphaned child of love, nurturing, values, information and discipline. In addition, any resulting reduction in income following the death of a parent could limit the household's ability to provide its children with material well-being. In this case, the loss of a parent has long-lasting implications to the future of bereaved children with respect to their quality of life and livelihood.

Researchers Hazer and Gredebäck (2023) show how war, displacement, and trauma impair child development, affecting cognitive and socio-emotional functioning. This suggests that caretaker death may exacerbate vulnerabilities, yet the direct pathway to dropout remains underexplored. Similarly, Mugisho (2024) identifies war as a driver of adolescent motherhood and dropout in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but the study emphasizes demographic outcomes rather than trauma-specific mechanisms. This indicates a gap in understanding how the death of a caretaker uniquely shapes dropout risks.

According to Assefa et al., (2022) and Verick, (2014) death of primary caretaker presents with a huge gap in the family and most especially the children who enrolled to school. Gertler et al; (2015) contend that health and educational investments encompass health risks for both the parent and the child. In many respects loss of a mother consistently predicts lower human capital accumulation including leaving education system (Mayai, 2022). On the other hand, the loss of a father results into higher dropout rates for older children in Indonesia and was found to have detrimental effects on school enrollment and child health in Mexican studies. These observations suggest the pivotal role of parents in education and related lifetime attainments.

Upon the death of a parent, children immediately feel insecure and naturally perceive the world as unsafe (Diago, 2024). Families are under obligation to provide orphans with structure and assurances to meet their needs. To build family structures, Diago (2024) and Demissie & Boru., (2023) suggest that the surviving parent and guardians, "don't parent alone." They recommend drawing on community resources, like support groups and camps, such as the Experience Camps where he works. He says that encouraging bereaved children to connect with other children is one of the best coping strategy parents and guardians utilize. Other mechanisms may include telling stories about the deceased parent and helping the child build a redefined relationship with the demised.

It is important to note that institutional fragility compounds trauma's effects. Belay et al. (2023) document the destruction of schools in Tigray, while Assefa et al. (2022) highlight parental roles in resilience schooling. However, these studies assume parental presence and do not address scenarios where caretakers are deceased. Demissie and Boru (2023) reveal challenges in parental support among refugee children, yet trauma from caretaker death is treated as background rather than a central explanatory factor. Diago (2023) further underscores vulnerabilities of child-headed households, pointing to gaps in social service delivery, but does not connect these realities to dropout patterns.

Furthermore, socio-economic dimensions intersect with trauma. A study by Verick (2014) addressed itself to female labor force participation, it asserts that caretaker death may push children—especially girls—into premature labor roles, thereby increasing dropout. This situation robs them of their childhood. Literature emphasizes economic participation rather than trauma's direct educational consequences. Collectively, these studies highlight trauma as an underlying but underexamined variable in dropout research.

Demissie & Boru., (2023) argued that death of parents especially the mother affects continuity of girl-child education in most African countries. This event sets in lack of proper care with situations that are associated with early marriage for survival. In many countries, people had endured war too long and education had become devalued for other life rhythms like early marriages. Similarly, Subrahmanyam, (2016) confirmed that in Eastern and Southern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, region, majority of the out-of-school children were due to the death of their parents and commencing school late. In such situations, completion of basic education was not realized. A study by Mugisho, (2024) in Congo found out that exposure to war caused several social challenges and negative outcomes citing dropout from school as one of the offshoots.

In conclusion, while existing scholarship richly documents trauma, grief, institutional collapse, and socio-economic consequences of war, it rarely integrates these dimensions to explain dropout as a direct outcome of caretaker death. A study on war-trauma and school dropout would therefore address critical gaps by providing a possible linkage of parent's death to dropout trajectories, examining how institutional collapse interacts with trauma to exacerbate disengagement, and situating dropout within broader socio-economic and gendered consequences of conflict. Ultimately, such research would provide a holistic understanding of how death of parents shapes educational futures, informing interventions that safeguard children's right to education in war-affected regions.

2.3 Lack of State Security and School Dropout

Between 2013 and 2017, conflict and insecurity severely disrupted education in South Sudan, with more than 800 schools destroyed by violence (Carapic & Dönges, 2016; Turner et al., 2005). In 2017, the Education Cluster reported that 31% of schools had experienced attacks by armed forces or non-state armed groups, while 63% of schools in the Greater Upper Nile region were affected. Notable incidents included looting by the White Army, as well as clashes between the SPLA and SPLA-IO that damaged schools and educational materials in Unity State. In Northern Bahr el Ghazal, warplanes reportedly bombed a school on 8 April 2015, demonstrating the spread of insecurity into the study area.

Such insecurity undermines school participation by exposing learners to threats of violence, displacement, and fear, particularly among girls whose parents often worry about their safety while travelling to and from school (Timothy, 2015). Although previous studies have highlighted the psychological and developmental consequences of trauma, war, and displacement (Downey & Crummy, 2022; Hazer & Gredebäck, 2023), limited attention has been paid to how the absence of state security directly contributes to school dropout. Examining this relationship in Northern Bahr el Ghazal would address an important research gap by linking governance and security challenges to educational disengagement.

Girls' education is highly vulnerable during conflict, as insecurity often forces families to prioritize survival over schooling (Justino, 2016; Pettersson & Öberg, 2020). Evidence from Rwanda shows that girls' education was frequently sacrificed during and after conflict, with girls

remaining close to home for safety (UNESCO, 2003). In South Sudan, insecurity, long distances to school, and parental concerns about sexual violence further constrained girls' access to education (Ainsworth, 2015). Between 2013 and 2017, widespread attacks on schools disrupted learning and undermined educational development (Carapic & Dönges, 2016).

Netsayi et al., (2016) acknowledged that lack of state security for children not only hinders education progress but also limits economic empowerment in the near future. Downey & Crummy (2022) and Hazer & Gredebäck (2023) assert that, threats to personal and physical security affect children's mental health and can make children drop out of school. Certainly, children sometimes find it difficult to attend school. Such situations often do not guarantee the physical security of children attending school. This happens to be a major threat to education attainment and school dropout.

Damtew and Ejigu (2022) document the devastating effects of conflict disasters in Ethiopia, noting the scale of victims and destruction. However, their analysis emphasizes conflict levels rather than the educational consequences of absent state protection. Similarly, Justino (2016) identifies supply and demand restrictions to education in conflict-affected countries, pointing to barriers such as destroyed infrastructure and reduced teacher availability. Yet, the role of state security in ensuring safe access to schools remains underexplored. This indicates a gap in understanding how insecurity itself—not only logistical barriers—drives dropout.

Another important point is the role of education in peace building. Sanatani (2020) argues that education fosters unity and national identity in South Sudan, while Sommers (2005) describes "islands of education" that persisted during civil war. These studies highlight education's resilience but do not interrogate how the absence of state security undermines such resilience. Mayai and Hammond (2022) further show that violence disrupts education in South Sudan, but their focus is on violence broadly rather than the specific absence of protective state structures. Thus, the literature points to violence as a barrier but leaves unaddressed the systemic failure of governments to safeguard schools.

Assefa et al., (2022) and Mudege et al; (2008) stated that parents sometimes withdraw their children from school for fear that they might be raped on their way to school or on the way back home. This generated an obstacle that led to school dropout in South Sudan. Similarly, Millicent et al; (2013) emphasized that in Korogocho at least three people were raped every week in the community and some of those raped were victims of gang rapes. Elsewhere, Damtew & Ejigu., (2022) cited lack of security within the schools and poverty, as well as early pregnancies as the leading cause of school dropout in conflict ravaged areas.

Although both male and female children had security fears it became apparent that sometimes their fears emanated from different concerns. For instance, boys feared assaults whilst girls were mostly afraid of rape, sexual physical attack and harassment. These differences impacted on school enrolment, dropout and sometimes school performance. Feelings of insecurity may emanate from the fact that those entrusted with students' security in schools are not able to ensure it or are, in some cases, the source of insecurity (Ndiku et al., 2013; Downey & Crummy., 2022).

Furthermore, psychosocial dimensions intersect with insecurity. Heltne et al. (2025) reveal local adults' perceptions of refugee children's adverse experiences, while Luphai, Momanyi, and Koros (2022) emphasize the role of school administrators in transforming traumatized students. These studies highlight community-level responses but do not address how state security failures exacerbate trauma and dropout. Asiimwe (2014) explores political conflict and education quality in South Sudan, yet the analysis centers on conflict dynamics rather than the protective role of state institutions. Idris (2024) provides a rapid evidence review on children and armed conflict, but again, the absence of state security as a causal factor in dropout is not foregrounded.

Moreover, gendered dimensions reveal further gaps. Rutandaro et al. (2022) document girls dropping out of school in South Sudan due to insecurity, while Toma (2019) emphasizes gendered barriers in education. Omojok Obac (2018) examines children's rights protection in Jonglei State, underscoring vulnerabilities in conflict zones. However, these studies emphasize rights and gender without fully connecting dropout to the absence of state security. This suggests that while insecurity is acknowledged, its systemic roots in state failure remain underexamined.

In conclusion, while existing scholarship richly documents trauma, displacement, violence, and gendered vulnerabilities in war contexts, it rarely integrates these dimensions to explain dropout as a direct outcome of absent state security. Studying lack of state security and school dropout would therefore address critical gaps that should be addressed to enhance education for all. Ultimately, such research would provide a holistic understanding of how state security—or its absence—shapes educational futures, thereby informing interventions that safeguard children's right to education in war-affected Northern Bahr el Ghazal state, South Sudan.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional research design as recommended by methodologists (Creswell & Zhang, 2009) while gathering empirical evidence about people lived experience of war-trauma among the would-be primary school going populations.

3.2 Local and Population of the Study

The study was conducted in selected primary schools. Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state is one of the 28 states of South Sudan founded on 2 October 2015 created after the former 10 states split up. This area is situated at; 8° 46' 02.00"N, 27° 23' 59.00"E (Latitude: 8.7671; Longitude: 27.3998). The researcher chose Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state for the case study because among 28 state in South Sudan, Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state had alarming cases (in 2016 a total of 220 pupils dropped out of school).

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

The study considered a sample size of 140 respondents selected from a target population using Krejcie and Morgan's Table (1970). We employed snowball and a purposive sampling procedure to get information from informants; parents, teachers and head teachers from the three selected school. Using simple random sampling and purposive sampling to interview key informants using tested tools.

3.4 Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Survey method was used to collect data from pupils below 18 years, using a questionnaire tool as suggested by Bhattacherjee, (2012) while interview method involving face -to- face interview to collect qualitative data from key respondents. The interview method involved presentation of oral-verbal stimuli presented with the lived experiences of war-trauma and school dropout.

An adapted and validated version of a Child PTSD Symptom Scale was utilized to assess the prevalence and severity of war-trauma symptoms among the child participants. The scale was chosen for its applicability in similar contexts and its ability to capture trauma-specific indicators. Parents/Guardians questionnaire instrument gathered demographic information, details on the child's educational history, household socio-economic status, exposure to war-related events, perceived barriers to education and parental perceptions of their child's well-being.

3.5 Reliability and Data Analysis

We considered the research instruments reliable since Cronbach's alpha got was 0.840 analyzed on 30 respondents using the verified questionnaire that had 33 question items. Quantitative data from the questionnaires was subjected to statistical analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Primary data was analyzed using descriptive statistics while linear regression and P-Values guided to establish the influence of war-trauma on primary school dropout in study area. The preferred data analysis approaches were found permissible for proper representation of data as recommended by Mezmir, (2020).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study was permitted by the university research review board and with the provision of field introduction letter. Anonymity was observed by the pre and post data collection process. Information provided by the respondents did not pose any danger directly or indirectly while free will to participation was ascertained with the informed consent procedures.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Prevalence of War-trauma and school dropout

The findings revealed a significant burden of both war-trauma and educational disengagement among primary school-aged children in the sampled population.

Table 1: **Prevalence of War-Trauma and School Dropout**

Indicator	Percentage (%)
War-Trauma Prevalence	30
School Dropout Rate	57

As shown in Table 1, 30% of the surveyed children exhibited symptoms consistent with war-trauma. Alarmingly, the school dropout rate among primary school-aged children in the study area stood at 57% among the study participants. Such rates underscore a severe crisis in educational access and retention, exacerbating the vulnerability of children already affected by conflict.

The obtained 30% war-trauma prevalence is consistent with literature indicating high rates of psychological distress in children from conflict-affected regions (Ayazi et al., 2014). The 57% school dropout rate is a stark indicator of educational collapse, reflecting a breakdown in systems much larger than individual family issues (Mayai, 2022).

4.2 The Level of Trauma among Children

The study developed interest in findings out the level of war-trauma among children who are of school going age in selected primary schools. Meaning of such data was appropriately derived using descriptive statistics as presented in table 2 followed by the discussions.

Table 2: War-Trauma among Children in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal State

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Lack of basic needs	3.97	1.01	High
Death of Parents	3.54	1.25	High
Lack of State Security	3.91	1.06	High
Grand Mean and Std	3.81	1.10	High

n = 140, *Source: Primary data*
Legend Very high (4.20 – 4.99), High (3.40 – 4.19), Moderate (2.60 – 3.39), Low (1.80 – 2. 59), Very Low (1.00 – 1.79)

Level of war- trauma among children was found to be high (Grand Mean= 3.81 and Std.=1.10) based on the scale of measurement used for the study. This implies that children were victims to traumatic events, devastating their opportunity to attend school. As Turner et al., (2005) eloquently pointed out, such children lost better opportunities for themselves and the community where they would dwell in the future to lust.

4.2.1 Lack of Basic Needs

Table 2 reveals that lack of basic needs was high with (Agg mean = 3.97, Std. = 1.01.). This implies that children were not having access to the basic necessities in life to necessitate their other human rights like the right to education. A number of respondents 49(35.0%) and 46(32.9%) reported that they hardly could get life requirements to make their studies possible. This explains high school drop-out rate in the research area.

Majority 50 (35.7%) and 51 (36.4%) of the children agreed that they did not have meals at school while they were studying. This implies that lack of food at school and home has tremendous influence on school dropout.

One of the key informants stated that '*majority of the families hardly have enough food for both domestic use and for children to feed on while at school'. Some families have one meal per day.'* This implies that the school-going primary children are expected to undergo starvation in the course of the academic life in the war situations of South Sudan. This situation requires interventions to redeem the life of the children and to ensure that the basic human rights of the children, including right to feeding and education are easily accessed.

Other determinant indicators to shortages of basic needs in education recorded with high mean included schools had no classroom for shelter especially from heat and rainy seasons, lack of drinking water. One of the key informants in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state, perceived basic needs as lack of food, water, medication, school uniform, shoe, books, pens, rule, set, pencils (general scholastic materials). If the child lacks all the mentioned materials, she or he can't go to school. In circumstances where there is no water and latrine for girls, will be very difficult to continue with their studies. Most key informants revealed that if there is no food at home, children cannot go to school because they will be weak to walk longer distances. Secondly when a child is hungry, he or she cannot learn anything from the class despite the teacher's efforts.

4.2.2 Death of Parents

As seen in Table 2, four indicators (lack of basic needs. Death of parents, lack of state security) to determine the effect of death of parents on school dropout inform this debate. The results revealed high scores (aggregate mean = 3.54, standard deviation = 1.25) with low deviation from the mean according to the Likert scale used during the study. This revelation implies that in the absence of parents, education of the children is easily compromised or

neglected. Parents as primary care givers are more concerned about the future of their children than other relatives or care givers.

Research revealed that shock was high (mean =3.59) among children upon realizing that their parents died. This was prevalent in about 30% of the respondents conceding that death of parents was a big shock in their lifetime. There were incidences where parents were killed in front of their children. Such traumatizing memories may remain emotionally disturbing events as they growth and with potentials of retardation. Demise of primary care givers greatly depresses children and causes disorganization of life.

Earlier on, Dawson (2018) associated the death of a parent with what he referred to as shock waves through a persons' self-perception and reposition the mental space occupied on the planet. Grief can be life changing. It's hard because... it's hard "*We tend to think of ourselves as 'children' until we lose our parents.* Umberson & Chen (1994) have it that, "*It is only then that we are on the front line of mortality*," said Debra J. Umberson, professor of sociology and author of the book "*Death of a Parent: Transition to a New Adult Identity*." "*This gives us a very different perspective on our own lifespans and where we fit in terms of generations*."

"Our parents are our first relationship… So, when a parent dies, it is your anchor being taken away," Kessler said. Similarly, the study in South Sudan revealed that Loss of financial support after parents' death was high (mean=3.49). About 53% of children experience financial challenges. Shorer & Mahat-Shamir., (2025) is emphatic that after the death of the parents learning is disrupted with barely any person to support their learning.

Diago (2024) and Demissie & Boru., (2023) addressed themselves to the seemingly depleted rights to education. What was unalienable seem to slip away a situation interwoven with financial hardships especially when in families identified with lack of support from relatives and poor state education. Nader, (2022) suggested that emphasizing the right kind of support, children can adapt expressing their grief in healthy ways that nature them to thrive. Acceptance to face reality to the psychological and physical impacts is ideal. Those impacts can be overcome with time and professional support.

Parental loss was found to have caused heightened emotional distress (mean =3.64) in the life of the children who participated in this study. Implying that death of parents triggered emotional anxieties, uncertainty, feelings of insecurity and fears in the life of the orphaned children. Steinberg, (2022) and Nader, (2022) agree that such traumatic experiences deprive the orphaned child of love, nurturing, values, information and discipline. Any resulting reduction in income following the death of a parent could limit the household's ability to provide children with material well-being. In addition, Mayai, (2022) asserted that both lack of parental presence and reduced income could reduce a child's human capital accumulation. In this case, parental loss may have long-lasting implications for the bereaved quality of life and livelihood. This is in agreement with our findings revealing a high mean (3.64) score about children getting married after death of their parents although sometimes it was against their wishes. This seems to imply that many orphaned children lack life prospects after the death of the parents during war. They may often undergo uncertainties of life where marriage might be perceived as a consolation but not a deserving immediate alternative.

Early marriage after the death of a parent during war was reported by 55% of the respondents. Such marriages were influenced by surviving relatives unable to take educational care of the surviving children. Getting married after the death of parents is thus at a high level in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state. When asked to give opinion whether girls get married after death of their parent against their wishes, a female teacher stated that;

> "many *parents died during the 2013 and 2015 because of Juba War (conflict), our children and husbands were collected from Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal by force to go and fight the Juba rebels and almost all were killed leaving many children orphaned and women widowed. Death of parents have caused a lot of school dropout in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal because there is no one supporting the family and children with school materials, health services, food and clothes special uniform because some of the widow can't manage to get these requirements. Many children became street children in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal because there is no one to provide them with food. So they went to the market areas, road begging for their daily survival."*

Demissie & Boru., (2023) argued that a death of parents, more so the mother, determines the continuation of girl child education in most African countries due to lack of proper care with situations that associate with early marriage for survival.

Another teacher stated that; *"if you go to Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal market, you will see many children stranded at*

the market areas because either both parents are dead or one of the parents is killed leaving the children stressed, traumatized begging at the roadsides and market, other children went to be soldiers ambitious to revenge for the death of their parents,"

According to Verick, (2014) death of a parent leaves a huge gap in the life of the family and most especially the children who enrolled into school. Despite the global pledges to achieve education for all by 2015, nearly 58 million children of primary school age worldwide were not enrolled in 2012, some of these challenges are associated with lack of encouragement and support from parents or death of parents (Demissie & Boru., 2023) and less than one-quarter of these 'out-of-school children were dropouts.

4.2.3 Lack of State Security

Findings about the phenomenon diminished state security were found to be high (Agg. Mean = 3.91, Std. =1.06) according to the scale of measurement used during this study. These findings seem to imply that there is still much demand in form of help from the community of Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal State to realize real peace and stability of the communities and the country at large. Educational rights of the children can better be nurtured under guaranteed peace as a rock base for any country's future development through the young generation.

Unfortunately, there were many cases of children facing insecurity on their way to school and recorded high mean scores of (3.82). This implies that there is still a lot of insecurity in the study area. That alone hampers children's right to access education throughout the school calendar. The war situation and related insecurities in the area seem to characterize the struggle to benefit from the educational rights of children with traumatic adventures on the daily basis thus impacting the children rights to access knowledge.

One of the key informants informed that "*many of our children who are interested in studying are betrayed by the increasing cases of insecurity and attacks on the children going to school, the fear for losing their lives".* This complements a notion that the war situation has for long been a hindrance to education system and also key detriment to children rights in the study area.

Schools being attacked during school time was recorded with high mean score (3.84) while being under threat whenever children were going to school was high with the mean of (3.99). One of the respondents wondered "…*why are solders interested in the young children who are the only future to South Sudan*? These statements are a display of emotional mix; confusion and frustration among the local people due to the happenings during the war especially when the young and naughty generation seems to be at crossroads with the question 'where to attain safety'.

Another respondent stated that "*Girls are victims in this state because of the bad security situation. They are raped, sexually harassed and abducted to be wives of the armed soldier. These make girls fear, and the parents stop their girl child from going to school. Many children have disappeared up to now on their way to school. Boys were abducted to child soldiers; others were killed and their way about are not known. These incidents made parents and guardians deny their children continuity with studying'.*

The statement is in agreement with Netsayi et al; (2016) who acknowledged that lack of state security for children hinder education progress that limit personal and national economic empowerment in nearby future. Additionally, Mudege et al; (2008) Assefa et al., (2022) agree that parents sometimes withdraw their children from school out of fear for their children's safety.

In summary, findings in Table 1 give reliable evidence that war-trauma among children of school going age; lack of basic needs, death of parents and lack of state security were high (Grand mean = 3.81, Std. = 1.10). This implies that war-trauma in society, especially the children, disorganized the possibility of access and benefit from the children's right to uninterrupted education cycles. The need to stabilize security is therefore evident and urgent to enable restoration of peace and respect of human rights in the study area.

4.3 Contributory Factors to School Drop-out Among Children

To assess the contributing factors to school drop-out was important to enable purposeful intervention to take roots in the nation emerging from war but with more tension that can trigger insurgencies.

Table **3**: Contributory Factors to School Dropout in Primary Schools

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Financial Status	3.84	1.13	High
Distance from School	3.82	1.08	High
Early and Forced Marriages	3.56	1.15	High
Grand Mean and Std.	3.74	1.12	High

n = 140, *Source: Primary data*

Legend Very high (4.20 – 4.99), High (3.40 – 4.19), Moderate (2.60 – 3.39), Low (1.80 – 2. 59), Very Low (1.00 – 1.79)

Results present how different factors weighted in relation to inability to complete school. Table 3 reveals that school drop-out was high (Grand mean=3.74, Std.=1.12) according to the scale used in the study area. These study findings imply that there were a big number of children whose stay in school was interrupted by the traumatic war situations leading to inability to complete school.

4.3.1 Financial Status

As seen in table 3, financial status was found with a high mean (μ = 3.84, Std. Deviation = 1.13) in relation to other study parameters for the study on school drop out from primary schools in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state. Money issues have a high effect on either stay or learners dropping out of school. Since education involves payment of school fees and the purchase of scholastic requirements, learners who do not have access to this requirement are unfortunately most likely to drop out of school.

According to (Mudege et al., 2008) in homes where there was spousal abuse, there was usually no pooling of resources. Usually, children from such homes depend on income from one parent, usually not enough to cater for all family needs. As a result, perceived nonessential needs such as schooling are cut from the household budget in favor of immediate, essential needs such as food and housing. There is a vicious cycle between insecurity and poverty. Insecurity is a dimension of poverty as well as a cause for spiraling poverty since poverty can increase with increasing insecurity. The resultant forces have a bearing on education attainment for most families in developing nations.

According to study findings, some pupils drop out of school due to lack of scholastic materials such as uniforms, shoe, books, pens and others. This was found with a high (mean 3.87, std. 1.08) score according to the Likert scale of measurement used for this study. This situation was strongly reported by 37.1% of the respondents. This implies that financial status of the family has negative effect on the children's schooling. One of the key informants reported that *"…there wasn't mean for my guardians to buy pencils and books. Every day my school was full of shame since I never had what to use and had to leave school*. Often the need to continue studying can be matched with the availability of school requirements.

Findings reveal a high mean (3.88,) on parents unable to pay school fees and no one could provide school requirements of some school going children. Such high poverty levels among households have little to leverage education. According to the Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal SMoE gender department, most families prefer keeping girls at home to assist their parents towards contributing to household economies. Joining their parents to take up odd livelihood ventures such as collection of firewood and cutting grass for sale at the markets become an alternative to unattainable academic pursuit. These results are in agreement with earlier study by Brown and Park (2002) in rural China where parents' incapability to compensate school fees was the reason for dropout of 47% of girls while only 33% of boy's dropout in elementary schools.

4.3.2 Distance from School

Respondents felt that distance from school was high (μ =3.82,) implying that schools are quite a distance from where most children reside. The distances covered should be manageable for children to enable them to arrive at school full of energy for the day. High aggregated score was due to revelations that distance to schools were too long to walk, at times girls are sexually assaulted on their way to or from school while cases of children abducted by armed men in isolated or far places before reaching school were reported. It was emphatic that parents could not escort their children to school due to the long distance.

Longer distances in conflict situations are inseparable with more traumatising events especially when children are distant from secure adults. In cases where 44.3% of respondents reported being sexually assaulted, such experiences become very traumatizing. To secure their lives, they may often choose to drop out of school. A respondent reported that; *"Girls are the victims in this state because of the bad security situation, they are raped, sexually harassed and abducted to be wives of the armed soldier. These make girls to fear and some parents stop their girl children from going to school."* Mudege et al; (2008) similarly stated that parents sometimes withdraw their children from school out of fear of rape on their way to or from school.

In other circumstances, children were abducted by armed men to isolated or far places before reaching school. The capture and hiding of children in concealed places triggers scare to the victims, peers and people who live in war torn areas. Fears surrounding such actions cannot foster child retention and completion of school. One respondent reported that; *"schooling and schools where unsafe, boys were abducted to child soldiers, others were killed and there were about are not known, …We are crying for peace in South Sudan to save the lives of our children.*

Another informant commented that *"the numbers of children who go missing due to involvement in school*

journeys are increasing. I cannot accept to lose my child just because of going to school. The situation is very unsafe." Parental basis for reluctance to keep children in school is deeply founded on community exposure and unresolved war-traumas around loss. Such genuine fear paired with love and care for the safety of the child especially under political instabilities is profound. A statement by UNICEF (2019) expressed similar concern about children's safety amid escalating violence and unrest in South Sudan. Netsayi et al; (2016) and Downey & Crummy, (2022) acknowledged that lack of state security for children hinders education progress that limit their economic empowerment in nearby future. Threats to personal and physical security can make children drop out of school.

4.3.3. Early and Forced Marriages

Findings in table 3 reveal that early and forced marriage was found to have high calculated mean ($\mu = 3.56$, SD = 1.15) that presuppose early or forced involvement in adult relationships. The high level was perpetuated by the belief that girls should marry when still young. In other cases, girls are not allowed to study since they are a source of wealth. Some girls stopped going to school since they were booked early for marriage. Therefore, girls get early family and domestic obligations that do not match school schedules.

Belief in early marriage hinders females from academic prosperity. About 31% of respondents perceived early marriage as ideal. Certainly, this practice bears negative effects to the health outcomes for girls who conceive when their bodies are still weak to sustain pregnancy.
These findings are in agreement with a survey by Joy for Children Uganda **(**2013) in the mountainous sub-counties of Kabarole- Karangura, Kabonero, and Kateebwa inhabited mainly by Bakonjo in July –October 2013. It was found out that child marriage is the leading cause of girls dropping out of school. Girls are married off in exchange for goats and other items since they are perceived by many as a source of wealth. Similar studies conducted in war areas deeply hold onto the primitive cultures where girls are wedded early for the exchange of animals and other valuables according to society demands (Demissie & Boru., 2023). Some girls stopped studying since they were booked early for marriage. Mayai, (2022) stated that while child marriage is a worldwide phenomenon, children forced into early marriage are more in warring societies to security, out of desperation but also marriage bond.

A respondent stated that, "*child marriage is a growing epidemic and a child who has begun her menstrual cycle, puberty and can produce children is seen as an adult*" another stated that, ""*Our parents look at us and see hundreds of cows,"* South Sudanese eighth grader commented. The cows she refers to are the dowry parents receive for marrying off their daughters. "*Parents perceive education of girls with little use, and they also think schooling devalues their cultural beliefs and the number of cows because the younger a girl is booked for marriage the more the cows*." These deliberations are female dominated. The Mother does not have any say in regard with decisions that are supposed to benefit the family. A child that is married off is solely for economic reasons. This increases the family's status in society. When a girl is eventually married, the family is generously awarded with gifts in the form of dowry.

In summary, findings in Table 3 provide evidence that financial status, distance from school and early or forced marriage was high (Grand mean = 3.74, Std. = 1.12) in the study area. This implies that the risk to school dropout was high in the area studied. This situation threatens to compromise further the children's right to education and other life chances to the self, society and the state. That is hazardous to the mental health of the society in general.

4.4 Factors Influencing School Dropout

To derive the influence of war-trauma on school dropout, we used Pearson Correlation production moment as presented in table 4.

Table **4**: The Influence of Trauma on School Dropout

Pearson Correlation (r)	0.349**
Sig. (2-tailed) (**P-Value**)	0.000
Coefficient of Determination (r^2)	0.122

n=140

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed

According to the research findings, there is a moderate linear relationship ($r = 0.349$, $p < .001$) between war-trauma and school dropout in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state South Sudan. War-trauma was found to contribute 12.2% to school dropout in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state. Regression analysis identified several key factors influencing school dropouts, with particular emphasis on the role of state security and basic needs as presented in table 5.

Table **5**: Regression analysis of Influence of War-trauma on School Dropout

Predictor Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
(Constant)	27.039	2.986		0.000
Lack of Basic Needs	0.355	0.163	0.177	0.031
Death of Parents	0.218	0.122	0.143	0.075
Lack of State Security	0.632	0.183	0.283	0.001

Significance at 0.05 level of significance, R^2= 0.165 Adjusted $R^{2=}$0.146

Quantitative results confirmed the statistical strength of this relationship between war-trauma and school dropout. Regression analysis indicated that lack of state security possesses more strength and predictive power (b = 0.283, p < .001) compared to lack of basic needs (b = 0.177, p < .001) and death of parents (b = 0.143, p > 0.05). Lack of state security contributes most at b = 0.283 which is (28.3%) to school dropout. The regression analysis indicated that the Adjusted R Square was .146 which meant that war-trauma as a whole explains 14.6% of school dropouts in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state (*Adjusted $R^{2=}$.146*) the other factors were held constant for this study.

These findings suggest that the pervasive insecurity in the region directly undermines children's ability to remain in school. Furthermore, the absence of basic needs within households was also found to be a significant contributing factor to educational attrition, highlighting the economic vulnerability that forces children out of school to support their families. The inability to afford school-related expenses was clearly noted. Interestingly, while tragic, the death of parents was not found to be a statistically significant predictor of school dropout. These findings attributed education attrition to factors external and broader systemic and environmental factors, such as overall insecurity and poverty, outweighing internal individual family tragedies as direct drivers of school dropout in specific war-affected settings.

4.5 Hypothesis Testing

Based on the correlation statistics, the null hypotheses were rejected for the alternative one that emphasizes how War-trauma has a relationship with school dropout in the area where this study was conducted. Our findings call to the attention of the warring parties in South Sudan to prioritize state peace and peace building processes as pivotal to subjective considerations.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence of the profound and multifaceted impact of war-trauma on primary school dropout rates in Northern Bahr - el - Ghazal state, South Sudan. The high prevalence of war trauma (30%) and the alarming school dropout rate (57%) underscore an urgent educational and humanitarian crisis. This research critically highlights that the lack of state security is the most significant predictor of school dropout, closely followed by the absence of basic needs. While the death of parents is undeniably a tragedy, its non-significant impact on dropout in this context points to the overwhelming influence of broader systemic insecurity and poverty. These findings issue a critical call to action, emphasizing that sustained peace building efforts about access to essential services and integrated mental health support must be prioritized to safeguard children's right to education and promote long-term stability and development in South Sudan.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. The ministry of defense and veteran affairs should re-enforce security and work with other ministries to find lasting solution to the grievances towards lasting peace in the country.
2. The ministry of internal affairs and ministry of defense and veteran affairs should re-enforce the existing policies that protect children from being harmed on the way to school and coming back home. The need to stabilize security is therefore evident and urgent to enable restoration of peace and respect for human rights in the study area.
3. The state ministry of education, local government leaders and village teams should work in solidarity to accompany children to and from schools as an avenue to minimize risks of harm and abduction of children by the rebels.
4. Gender ministry and ministry of education through the lower community workers should conduct community sensitizations, on Gender based violence awareness raising on the harmful

cultural and traditional practices of the women and girls special on the issues of early and forced marriages of the underage girls.

5. The education ministry and the ministry of health should educate the community about the effect and consequences of forced marriages, early pregnancies complications and the benefit of the girl's education to the family and community. Development of Community poverty reduction strategies regeneration program and poverty reduction strategies may in the end also reduce some forms of insecurity that children suffer from in certain communities and improve school attendance and further reduce school dropout.

Possible War-Trauma recovery programs

Given the situation in South Sudan, trauma treatment approaches should incorporate protection services and economic empowerment initiatives to address both psychological and social vulnerabilities among girls and women in the broader community to promote resilience.

Institutionalize Community-based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS). Formulate community and peer support groups under the oversight of a trained facilitators can help school dropouts and general population to process grief, rebuild social networks, and strengthen coping skills.

Create trauma awareness and healing: initiative for open discussion and dialogue can help. Advance exiting initaitives like UNDP Trauma Awareness and Psychosocial Support model. This will promote trauma education, emotional expression, resilience building, and reconciliation through trained community volunteers and psychosocial facilitators.

Innovative school-based trauma intervention should be initiated for schools to become safe healing spaces. Trauma-informed education in war areas may include psychoeducation on stress and trauma, peer support groups, structured play and recreational activities, teacher training in psychological first aid and early identification of distressed learners.

Gender sensitive trauma services for women and girls exposed to sexual violence, forced marriage, and gender-based violence require specialized counseling, safe spaces, legal support, and survivor-centered care.

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