

## Gender norms, conflict sensitivity and transition in South Sudan

CSRF Better Aid Forum Briefing Paper<sup>1</sup>

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South Sudan continues to face recurring violent conflict, food insecurity, corruption, and poverty. Despite positive shifts within national legislation on gender equality, political, social, and economic power in South Sudanese society continues to reflect the deep patriarchy within society. The role of women and men, reflecting the gender norms of their respective cultural milieus, in both resolving and driving conflict is often not well understood by aid actors. Patterns of marginalisation, affecting both women and men, stem from the colonial era and were largely present during the Second Sudan Civil War. These patterns continue to intersect with conflict, leading to a build-up of toxic masculinities and violence in South Sudan. Addressing gender inequality, poverty and violence using a conflict-sensitive approach is vital for peace in South Sudan, as well as its long-term development. Aid actors should ensure this process is inclusive, with particular attention paid to marginalised and disempowered women and girls, men and boys.

### Introduction

It is now a decade since South Sudan gained independence and the world's newest country continues to struggle with poverty, rising food insecurity, displacement, and armed violence. In September 2018, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM)-led government of South Sudan, the SPLM in Opposition (SPLM-IO), and the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA), signed the *Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS)*. The signing of the R-ARCSS brought the possibility that widespread violence and conflict in South Sudan would come to an end, humanitarian needs would reduce, and the focus could shift to longer-term recovery and development programming. While the signing of the R-ARCSS brought an end to national-level conflict, since its signature violence at the sub-national and local levels has increased, as have humanitarian needs.<sup>2</sup> The year 2020 was anticipated to be a pivotal year as the Revitalised-Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) was formed, paving the way for the implementation of the milestones outlined in the R-ARCSS. However, in 2020 and 2021, South Sudan faced the global Covid-19 pandemic, a significant rise in organised violence at the sub-national and local levels<sup>3</sup>, flooding and famine-like conditions in parts of the country, the continued economic crisis, and the slow implementation of the R-ARCSS. These factors have all either impacted on, or been impacted by, the slow pace of the political transition, South Sudanese people's livelihoods and security, and the aid community's ability to shift away from humanitarian assistance. Amongst those that have been most affected by these crises are women and girls, who continue to experience the greatest adverse impacts.

Patriarchal values and gender norms permeate all levels of political, social, economic and security systems in South Sudan, including how conflict and violence is driven and experienced by women, men, girls, and boys. Gender norms often place men at the loci of power, decision-making, resource

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<sup>1</sup> The Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility's (CSRF) Better Aid Forum (BAF) is a series of events and discussions with different stakeholders to consider the long-term objectives and ambitions of the aid sector in South Sudan. The CSRF commissioned several papers to consider key issues in South Sudan that play a role in shaping how aid is conceptualised and delivered in South Sudan'. This briefing paper on Gender is the second in the BAF Briefing Paper series for 2021 that also looked at localisation and revisits the 'Aiding the Peace' multi-donor evaluation that was conducted in 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Geneva Call (2021), '[Understanding Humanitarian Access and the Protection of Civilians in an Era of Depoliticised War](#)', May.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

allocation and privileges, leaving women and girls relegated to taking care of domestic chores at home and having limited options for engaging in public life and decision-making spaces.<sup>4</sup> However, these same gender norms also pressure men and boys to conform to behaviours and roles that can perpetuate notions of militarised or violent masculinities. In addition, conflict and tensions between communities re-enforce violent and militarised behaviours by young men, as seen by the increase in sexual violence, torture and tactics that destroy households’ productive assets, all of which often target or negatively impact on women and girls.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, while gender norms and roles are expressed differently across South Sudanese communities, a common characteristic is the perpetuation of violent behaviour by men and boys to resolve issues, while also limiting ‘space’ for women and girls outside of their traditional roles. It must also be recognised, however, that not all men enjoy the same privilege and power, nor do all women experience the same levels of exclusion. Marginalisation/privilege, exclusion/inclusion and vulnerability/resilience are often linked not only to an individual’s gender, but also to their social and economic status, identity group, family ties or other factors.

Positive and negative social norms are both created, and challenged by, the behaviour of men and women. Gender roles and norms in South Sudan are complex and, as a result, they also interact with conflict dynamics in a myriad of ways. This paper looks at how gender influences the exercise of power, access to resources and representation, and the challenges and opportunities for gender- and conflict-sensitive aid this presents to aid actors. Based on qualitative data and informed by a literature review and virtual interviews<sup>6</sup> with selected individual experts, it outlines key trends and patterns on gender and conflict sensitivity and the practical implications for aid actors, and offers actionable recommendations for donors and aid agencies to consider.

## Gender norms, roles, and conflict in South Sudan

South Sudan continues to face severe underdevelopment, recurring violent conflict, food insecurity, corruption, and poverty. In addition to these challenges, social and cultural norms within South Sudanese society create an environment where women and girls are often viewed as unsuited to positions of authority or leadership, at best, or commodities, at worst.<sup>7</sup> The systemic marginalisation of, and violence against, specific identity groups and women was common during the Second Sudan Civil War; many of these patterns continued after independence and persist to this day. While diplomatic efforts have focused on the R-ARCSS as a process to broker peace and address drivers of inequality at the national level, addressing the key drivers of conflict and violence at the local and sub-national levels remains an ongoing challenge, for diplomats and aid actors alike.

### Patriarchy and gender in South Sudan

Entrenched patriarchal norms and structures in South Sudan have led to significant imbalances between different women, men, women, girls, and boys, as demonstrated by the unequal access to resources and decision-making,

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**40% of males in South Sudan over 15 years of age can read and write...  
 only 16% of females the same age can**

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<sup>4</sup> Bubenzer F and Lacey E (2013), ‘[Opportunities for Gender Justice and Reconciliation in South Sudan](#)’, The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Policy Brief Number 12, July.

<sup>5</sup> Cone D (2019), ‘[Still in Danger: Women and Girls Face Sexual Violence in South Sudan Despite Peace Deal](#)’, Refugees International, October.

<sup>6</sup> The research was done remotely, and the interviews took place on virtual platforms, with 10 experts interviewed. For those working on gender and conflict in South Sudan, semi-structured interviews were used, while for key experts on gender and those possessing local knowledge of the context an open-ended interview approach was used.

<sup>7</sup> Cone D (2019), op. cit.

depending on one's gender, age or identity group.<sup>8</sup> Women account for more than 60% of the population of South Sudan, which is among the youngest in the world (about 73.7% of South Sudanese are below the age of 30).<sup>9</sup> Early marriage is prevalent in South Sudan, with almost half of all girls married before the age of 18.<sup>10</sup> Girls are also less likely than boys to go to school, although a girl from a well-off family in an urban area has a greater chance of attending school and completing her education than a boy from a poor family in a rural area.

Women aged 18 to 35 years are largely excluded from decision-making, with South Sudan ranked 163 out of 167 in the 2019/20 Women, Peace and Security Index (WPSI), which analyses the well-being of women in relation to inclusion, justice and security.<sup>11</sup> A large-scale survey in 2017 found that up to 65% of South Sudanese women interviewed had experienced either sexual or physical violence in their lifetime.<sup>12</sup> Despite rape being a crime to be handled by the criminal courts in South Sudan, families of the victim often prefer to use the Chiefs' Courts, often resulting in the young woman being forced to marry her assailant, thus victimising her twice. Conflict and violence related sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are also frequently managed through the customary law system, which can be more focused on easing tensions between communities, primarily through the payment of compensation or the return of stolen property, than providing justice for an individual. This creates a culture of impunity for perpetrators and can leave the grievances of an SGBV survivor and their family unaddressed.<sup>13</sup> South Sudan continues to experience one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world<sup>14</sup>, with poverty, lack of access to healthcare and basic services, and societal pressure on women to give birth to many children, all seen as contributing factors.

These statistics and practices are only a small example of the impact that marginalisation rooted in patriarchy and male hierarchies can affect women and girls across South Sudan.<sup>15</sup> Social expectations of and economic opportunities open to both women and men encourage women to prioritise care-giving roles while men are expected to provide for and defend their families and communities. Within families, caregiving is seen as secondary, thereby reinforcing the idea that while women's roles are important, they are secondary to men's. There are age-based distinctions for men's roles: young men are expected to provide security, keeping their families and communities safe, while older men take up leadership and decision-making roles. For both men and women, not conforming to or fulfilling these roles and responsibilities risks their losing or having a lowering social status in their community's eyes. Not surprisingly, it is mostly older men who have the most social, political, and economic influence, thereby having significant power and privilege, whether as an influential community leader, Chief or government official.<sup>16</sup> This leaves those with less power and privilege, not just women and girls, but also young men, struggling to find the opportunities or resources that older men often have access to.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with South Sudanese civil society representative, woman, 19 January 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Mayai AT (2020), '[South Sudan's Demography – Looking to 2050](#)', Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility Briefing Paper, October.

<sup>10</sup> Saferworld (2020), '["Like the military of the village": Security, justice and community defence groups in south-east South Sudan](#)', February.

<sup>11</sup> Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (2019), '[Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20](#)', GIWPS and PRIO, December.

<sup>12</sup> Global Women's Institute (2017), '[No Safe Place: A Lifetime of Violence for Conflict-Affected Women and Girls in South Sudan, Summary Report](#)', George Washington University, November.

<sup>13</sup> Legal Action Worldwide (2018), '[Accountability for Sexual Violence Committed by Armed Men in South Sudan](#)', May.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Harrop (2021), 'The Situation of Women and Children in South Sudan: 2018 – 2020', UNICEF South Sudan.

<sup>15</sup> Jok AA, Leitch RA, Vandewint C (2004), '[A Study of Customary Law in Contemporary Southern Sudan](#)', World Vision and the South Sudan Secretariat of Legal and Constitutional Affairs, March.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## Gender, Marginalisation and Conflict in South Sudan

Gender norms in South Sudan have been changing, albeit slowly, with gender roles evolving over the last decades as more women, particularly in urban areas, join the workforce, take up roles in government, run their own businesses and serve in the armed forces.<sup>17</sup> An example of this shift can be found in the changes in national policy and laws on gender equality since South Sudan gained independence, which seek to increase women’s representation in the legislative assembly and address women’s unequal access to land ownership.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, female-heads of households often cannot assert access to, ownership of or control over land and other assets in their own right, either within their own families, or at the community level. Women in this situation are often required to claim these rights through their male relatives, who can, in turn, deny a woman’s right to own or control such assets, instead ‘managing them’ for her, usually to her detriment. In rural areas, where adherence to strict gender norms is more prevalent and are often the most difficult to challenge, there are fewer opportunities for women and girls to access education, engage in income generating opportunities or participate in public decision-making forums. Customary laws often prevail over national legislation rendering policy-level progress on gender equality and inclusion ineffective, particularly in marginalised and rural communities.

Among South Sudanese pastoralist communities, a well-known harmful gender norm is the practice of ‘bride wealth’, usually in the form of cattle or cash paid to the family of a young woman.<sup>19</sup> To get married, many young men need access to cattle or cash, either through familial ties or raiding. The payment and acceptance of ‘bride wealth’ is a transactional process involving not only a man and a woman, but their entire families.<sup>20</sup> In addition, a bride price ‘network’ can extend to entire communities. This can leave a young woman seen as a commodity, not only by members of her own family, but also by her husband and his family. As a result of this, women are often married young and experience significant power imbalances within their marital households. If a young woman finds herself in an abusive situation, she often has few means of addressing it, either through customary law system or by appealing to her own family – if she wishes to leave, her family will need to return cattle or cash received as bride wealth, which they are often reluctant to do.<sup>21</sup>

“Disenfranchised young men who thought South Sudan was going to promise them something saw all resources and opportunities taken up by select few men at national level. This is part of what the violence is about.”

*Source:* Interview with former female international donor who worked in South Sudan

Young men also face pressures: they are not considered ‘men’ until they are married. Cattle raiding is one means by which young men from pastoralist communities can obtain enough cattle to pay bride wealth and get married, thereby achieving ‘manhood’.<sup>22</sup> Women and girls are taught to encourage and admire men and boys who participate, praising young men who are ‘successful’ in cattle raids, and using songs and other means to publicly shame those who do not.<sup>23</sup> Still widely practiced, cattle raiding can be a key factor in organised

<sup>17</sup> UNDP South Sudan (2018), [‘Study on the Traditional and Changing Role of Gender and Women in Peacebuilding in South Sudan’](#), December.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with civil society representative, woman, 7<sup>th</sup> July 2021

<sup>19</sup> The practice of ‘bride wealth’ or ‘bride price’ is not unique to South Sudan and is still practiced in many countries across Africa, as well as in Asia.

<sup>20</sup> Iffat Idris (2018), [‘Livestock and conflict in South Sudan’](#), K4D Helpdesk, October.

<sup>21</sup> Kangas A, et al. (2015), [‘Gender Topic Guide: Gender in fragile and conflict-affected environments’](#), Institute of Development Studies, University of Birmingham, April.

<sup>22</sup> Wright H (2014), [‘Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding: perspectives on men through a gender lens’](#), Saferworld, November.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

violence at both local and sub-national levels, and as they have become more violent and militarised, have contributed to a heightened notion of militarised masculinities.<sup>24</sup>

As noted above, men, especially older men, are considered the primary decision-makers both within the family and the larger community. As a result, community leaders, tribal elders, key government authorities, and political actors are often men.<sup>25</sup> Within families, older men often make decisions about, or have significant influence on, the use and distribution of financial and other resources among family members, especially cash income. However, women are not powerless or without agency with regards to how resources are distributed within the family, particularly if it is income they have earned from a job or business, or if the resources fall within the remit of a 'woman's responsibility' within the family. In communities, it's mainly older men who participate in decision-making bodies, be they *boma* or *payam*<sup>26</sup> development committees, or the Chiefs' Courts. Even in aid programmes where the equal participation of women and men is often a standard approach to community engagement, gender norms can make it difficult for women and young men to actively participate in discussions or voice their concerns. Furthermore, women are severely under-represented in decision-making at all levels of public life. Currently, women make up 178 seats out of 550<sup>27</sup> in the national legislative assembly and, while 25% of representation at sub-national level was constitutionally guaranteed to women, at present there is only a single woman Governor<sup>28</sup> out of ten. Women's representation at the local level is dismal, which inhibits women from making meaningful changes.

Finally, family and civil disputes, especially outside main urban areas, are usually resolved through Chief's Courts, which use customary law and do not meet international human rights standards, especially regarding protecting the rights of girls and women.<sup>29</sup> In areas where there are residents who have been internally displaced, are refugees or from different identity groups, Chief's Courts may take into account the customary laws of these groups, if it is different from the that of the local community. However, this is not always the case, leaving those from outside the resident or dominant community with few options. These inequalities all contribute to, and exacerbate, differences between men and women from diverse backgrounds, with longer-term negative implications, particularly for women, on food security, access to education and other services, and control over key economic resources such as land.<sup>30</sup>

### Gender dynamics, displacement, and conflict

Gender relations in South Sudan are complex, and while the roles and responsibilities of women, men, girls, and boys are clearly delineated, they can and do alter. In times of crisis and conflict, gender roles and responsibilities can change and adapt to take account of the context, the needs and the different coping strategies families and individuals use. Many South Sudanese have experienced displacement, often multiple times, both before and after the country's independence, due to conflict, floods, or other factors. Options pursued have included moving to refugee camps in

<sup>24</sup> Rodenbeck L (2021), '[Mad Cow: How bride-price inflation is stoking ethnic violence in South Sudan](#)', *Brown Political Review*, 16 April.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with civil society representatives, women, held separately on 15, 19 January and 22 January 2021

<sup>26</sup> *Bomas* and *payams* are the lower-level administrative divisions in South Sudan, with the *boma* equivalent to fifth-level divisions elsewhere that are described as village, block, or ward. The *payam* is the fourth-level division; it is required to have a minimum population of 25,000 people and is equivalent to a 'sub-county'.

<sup>27</sup> [Gender Quotas Database: South Sudan](#), International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

<sup>28</sup> Wudu SW (2020), '[South Sudan President Appoints 1 Woman Among 8 Governors, 3 Administrators](#)', *Voice of America News: South Sudan Focus*, 30 June.

<sup>29</sup> Huser C (2018), '[Conflict and Gender Study – South Sudan: Addressing Root Causes Programme](#)', Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development (ACORD), Dan Church Aid (DCA), and the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR), January.

<sup>30</sup> Logo KH (2021), '[Gender Equality and Civicsness in Higher Education in South Sudan: Debates from University of Juba Circles](#)', Conflict Research Programme, LSE, February.

neighbouring countries, into towns or to camps for internally displaced, often adjacent to urban centres. According to the latest statistics,<sup>31</sup> there are more than 2.2 million South Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries, and 1.62 million who are internally displaced. Organised violence at the local and sub-national levels has frequently stripped or destroyed household and community assets, including infrastructure, and looted humanitarian supplies. In June 2021, OCHA estimated that around 7.2 million South Sudanese were severely food insecure, out of a population of just over 11 million, including 108,000 people facing catastrophic, ‘famine-likely’ conditions.<sup>32</sup>

Events over the past few years have, once again, laid bare the vulnerability of women and girls during times of conflict and instability.<sup>33</sup> Women and girls have increasingly become the targets of violence, including SGBV, and forced and early marriages have also tended to increase and are more tolerated during times of conflict.<sup>34</sup> A 2019 joint agency report found that ‘up to 80% of displaced households are female-headed’,<sup>35</sup> and they often have to navigate the bureaucracy involved in claiming refugee status or registering as an IDP. In these situations, women and girls are more vulnerable to exploitation, including sexual exploitation, as they take up the unfamiliar or untraditional role of providing for their families by taking on paid employment or starting small businesses.<sup>36</sup> This also affects girls, who are often made responsible for household chores while their mother looks for income opportunities. All these factors contribute to frustrating or limiting women’s efforts to actively participate in peace and reconciliation efforts.<sup>37</sup>

Poverty has increased over the last few years<sup>38</sup> in South Sudan and it underscores the vulnerabilities that afflict all groups, including young women and men. Prolonged conflict and displacement over the last years have not allowed many vulnerable groups to come out of their fragile economic condition and change their circumstances for a better life. This has pushed more men, specifically younger men from rural areas, to travel to different locations in search for jobs or to join the fighting creating a cycle of violence and poverty. Examples of young men dropping out of school because they could not afford the fees and transport costs involved is a reminder of how poverty and conflict intersect affecting both women and men.<sup>39</sup> While there are more women in the informal market sector at present, the unpredictability of conflict over the last few years continues to haunt any chance of long-term progress.

Men and boys face different risks and challenges. Prevalent notions of masculinity see them as protectors of their communities and families against attack and valorise aggressive and violent behaviour in pursuit of this. They are also vulnerable to forced recruitment into the military or militias, as well as social pressure to engage in violent behaviour to live up to idealised notions of masculinity and prove they are a ‘real man’.<sup>40</sup> The push and pull factors<sup>41</sup> of violent masculinities can be seen in the levels of violence at the local and sub-national levels, often carried out by young men, which has continued since the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018. The recurring violence in Jonglei,

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<sup>31</sup> OCHA (2021), ‘[South Sudan Humanitarian Snapshot \(June 2021\)](#)’, July.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (2014), ‘[Conflict in South Sudan: How does it affect women?](#)’, May.

<sup>34</sup> Interview, Adut Daniel, Programme Officer for the Federation of Women Lawyers – South Sudan, 19<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Buchanan E (2019), ‘[No Simple Solutions: Women, Displacement and Durable Solutions in South Sudan](#)’, Oxfam International, Nile Hope, Titi Foundation, Danish Refugee Council, Norwegian Refugee Council and CARE, September.

<sup>36</sup> Bennett J, Pantuliano S, Fenton W, Vaux A, Barnett C and Brusset E (2010), ‘[Aiding the Peace: A Multi-donor Evaluation of Support to Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities in Southern Sudan 2005–2010](#)’, December.

<sup>37</sup> UNDP South Sudan (2018), op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> World Bank (2019), ‘Strengthening Gender Outcomes in Social Protection and Poverty Focused Programs in South Sudan’, P169065: 22 June.

<sup>39</sup> Martin E (2010) ‘[Gender, Violence and Survival in Juba, South Sudan](#)’, Humanitarian Policy Group, Policy Brief 42, November.

<sup>40</sup> UNDP South Sudan (2018), op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> Price R, Ornet A (2017), ‘[Youth in South Sudan: Livelihoods and Conflict](#)’, K4D Helpdesk, November.

Warrap, Lakes and Equatoria states has displaced over 150,000 people, resulted in many deaths, and led to the continued high level of humanitarian needs.

The level of brutality, dehumanisation, and sexualised nature of much of the recent violence is different from the past, when targeted attacks on women and children were prohibited. It has deepened divisions between communities, and by targeting women, has eroded social bonds and women’s standing within their own communities. Women and girls not only face the direct impact of violent conflict, but they also must cope with the secondary and longer-term impacts such as reduced access to health and education in their communities when these services are halted or destroyed.

## Key challenges and opportunities in the current context

### Transition period and its implications for women’s political participation

Signed in September 2018, the R-ARCSS ended national-level conflict. Despite initial hopes, the implementation of the R-ARCSS has been slow: it took until February 2020 for the R-TGoNU to be formed, the appointment of State Governors was not completed until January 2021, and members appointed to the Revitalised Transitional National Legislative Assembly were only sworn-in in August 2021. Meanwhile, R-ARCSS partners and guarantors continue to engage with non-signatories to bring them into the broader agreement and its implementation, with limited success. In the meantime, organised violence at the sub-national and local levels has not only continued, but in some areas, intensified, linked to national-level interests and competition over the control of natural resources, access to power, marginalisation, disputes over land, administrative borders, and other factors.<sup>42</sup>

“When we demonstrated about the exclusion of women in politics by the political parties and issues of gender-based violence, it was women that locked us out of the SPLM house. The women in politics told us to leave and they were blocking us from delivering the paper to the SPLM leadership.”

*Source:* Interview with Female South Sudanese Civil Society member

Nonetheless, the negotiations leading up to its signature and the actual document itself reflected women’s active role in peace processes and their expectation that they would have an active role governing the country: 25% of the South Sudanese delegates who signed the R-ARCSS were women, and Chapter 1 stipulated that at least one of the Vice Presidents should be a women and that women should hold at least 35 percent of executive positions.<sup>43</sup> By comparison, negotiations for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed 13 years earlier only included two women Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) representatives, who primarily acted as observers, rather than negotiators.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, 28% of representatives in the Transitional National Legislature are women.<sup>45</sup> Although these developments indicate there has been some progress in creating more political ‘space’ for women, it has primarily been at the national level, while women’s political empowerment at sub-national and local levels remains limited.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, it is not simply a numbers game of more women, but also ensuring that it is a diversity of women, coming from different socio-economic and identity groups and that they play a meaningful role in decision-making.

The current period of transition offers the potential to address some of the problems caused by the conflict and its implications for both men and women. The R-ARCSS includes provisions for providing humanitarian assistance and protecting civilians in need, as well as well as longer-term durable

<sup>42</sup> Lei Ravelo J (2014), [‘What Foreign Aid Got Wrong in South Sudan’](#), *Devex*, 23 January.

<sup>43</sup> Bazugba AM, et al (2020), [‘Women’s Experiences in the South Sudan Peace Process 2013-2018’](#), Folke Bernadette Academy, Crisis Management Initiative, National Transformational Leadership Institute.

<sup>44</sup> Aldehaib A (2010), [‘Sudan’s Comprehensive Peace Agreement Viewed Through the Eyes of the Women of South Sudan’](#), Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.

<sup>45</sup> Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, [South Sudan Country Data](#).

<sup>46</sup> Interview carried out with a former South Sudanese senior government authority, woman, 22 January 2021

solutions for returns, and recovery and reconstruction activities.<sup>47</sup> However, to date several of the key mechanisms that would provide access to micro or medium financial credits for women and young people or a social safety net for vulnerable South Sudanese have yet to be established.<sup>48</sup> Implementation has been hampered by the lack of political will on the government’s part to allocate their own limited financial resources, coupled with the economic crisis, the effects of Covid-19 and corruption. Donors have either been reluctant to or are legally barred from provide direct funding to the R-TGoNU until there is more substantive progress made on implementing key revisions of the R-ARCSS, such as security sector and public financing reform, and there is a more concerned effort by the government to tackle problems such as corruption and financial mismanagement.

The establishment of the various funds is not the only area designed to help women in the transition period which has faced challenges. The affirmative action thresholds, increased from 25% to 35%, sought to bring more women in executive positions at the national and sub-national levels.<sup>49</sup> However, these commitments have yet to be met. In a March 2021 press release, H.E. Maj. Gen. Charles Tai Gituai, the Interim Chairperson of the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), noted “there is a clear need for more women to be appointed at all levels of government, especially at the state executive and legislative positions.”<sup>50</sup>

“Usually, peace negotiations include women and men to discuss issues including post-conflict reconstruction, DDR, and others... However, it is always such that when it is time to implement peace, the protagonist are mostly men and they as the ‘leaders of the war’, tend to choose their own priorities.... Men would also usually exclude strong women from participating and opt for a few women to form their own political parties. This is because they expect that the majority of women who had fought alongside them and supported the war to return home to their tasks that were assigned to them traditionally – like go back and get married, tend to the children and to the home.”

*Source:* Interview with female former South Sudanese senior government official

**Gender roles and transition to peace – barriers and opportunities**

Women have played a key, if under-recognised, role in the peace processes at both the national and local levels, and their continued involvement is vital for sustained peace. Furthermore, the way that women have worked in broad coalitions and gained buy-in at the local level for their work increases the chances of widespread support.<sup>51</sup> As UNSCR 1325 notes, “peace and security efforts are more sustainable when women are equal partners in the prevention of violent conflict, the delivery of relief and recovery efforts and in the forging of lasting peace.”<sup>52</sup> It’s important that that post-conflict reconstruction and service delivery is undertaken with a gendered lens and carefully crafted sensitivity. The barriers women continue to face need to be recognised and the gender norms which perpetuate them need to be addressed, including those harmful norms that are being perpetuated by women themselves.<sup>53</sup>

Patriarchal gender norms are not synonymous with men and male hierarchy. It is a system of power practiced and perpetuated by both women and men, particularly those who are in power, to maintain

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<sup>47</sup> Article 3.1 – 3.1.1.5. Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the conflict in South Sudan, 2018.  
<sup>48</sup> This includes mechanisms such as the Youth Enterprise Development Fund, Women Enterprise Development Fund, and Social Security Fund; Acord (2021), ‘[Slow Peace, UNMISS’s Impact and COVID-19 in South Sudan](#)’, March.  
<sup>49</sup> Interview, Hon. Janet Aya Alex, Member of the Revitalized Transitional National Assembly, representing Morobo Country of Central Equatoria, 15th January 2021.  
<sup>50</sup> Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) (2021), ‘[Reconstitute TNLA and Adhere to the 35% Level of Women’s Representation](#)’, Press Release, 31 March.  
<sup>51</sup> Pelham S (2020), ‘[Born to Lead: Recommendations on increasing women’s participation in South Sudan’s peace process](#)’, Briefing Note, Oxfam, January.  
<sup>52</sup> UNSC (2000), ‘[Resolution 1325 \(2000\)](#), Adopted by the Security Council on 31 October 31, 2000’, S/RES/1325 (2000).  
<sup>53</sup> Interview carried out with a gender expert, Juba-based civil society member, 19 January 2021

the existing status quo. Discounting women's role in perpetuating these norms, particularly women who 'benefit' from these norms, can lead to gender-blind approaches and strategies. Often in South Sudan, a gendered approach to programming equates women as survivors and victims, and men, especially young men, as perpetrators. This overlooks the complex drivers of inequality and marginalisation that underpin South Sudan's continuing violence and cut across the man-woman binary to include factors such as identity group, education level, economic status, and familial and other social relationships, to name a few.

Developing alternative and culturally accepted notions of both masculinity and femininity, that focus on non-violence and gender equality, remains a key challenge when addressing both gender inequalities and the drivers of conflict in South Sudan. Engaging men and boys to positively challenge negative social norms (including gender norms) is critical to ensuring that women and girls have meaningful opportunities for education, livelihoods, and sustained participation in the public sphere. Furthermore, reducing the prevalence and risks of SGBV, including rape, cannot be done by women and girls alone – changes are needed in the attitudes and behaviours of men and boys. Gender norms related to violent masculinities pose a key risk to sustainable peace and the security of women and girls. In the current context, the prevalence of small arms, a militarised mindset and the normalisation of violence resulting from decades of conflict serve to reinforce social expectations about what it means to be a 'real man'. Living up to these expectations, combined with the lack of economic opportunities has led many young men to engage in criminality, cattle raids, and more violence.<sup>54</sup> It is not necessarily that young men *want* to engage in such detrimental activities, but rather that they are either *expected* to or feel they have no other livelihood option. Like women and girls, young men and boys can often feel that they have little power over their circumstances, with decisions being made by more powerful and influential individuals, often wealthier, older men. This erodes their willingness to take responsibility for the negative consequences of their actions, particularly in relation to women or other communities. Positively engaging with men and boys to change the power dynamics between men and women can help rebalance some of the current inequalities and empower women to continue engaging with the peace process.<sup>55</sup> This must be done in tandem with efforts to work with women, men, girls, and boys to challenge the notions of violent masculinity that men, especially young men, feel pressured to conform to and results in negative social consequences if they do not.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Interview carried out with gender expert, Juba-based, 19 January 2021

## Implications of Covid-19 on gender dynamics

Within weeks of the R-TGoNU being formed, the Covid-19 pandemic hit, resulting in lockdown restrictions that were intended to curb the spread of the virus.<sup>56</sup> While the response did, in the short term, result in a united political front to tackle Covid-19, it shifted attention away from implementing the already delayed R-ARCSS. Furthermore, the pandemic, and resulting lockdowns, worsened the situation for women and girls. Women make up the majority of front-line health workers, caregivers at home, community volunteers and mobilisers, and many were overwhelmed by additional responsibilities such as health and domestic chores.<sup>57</sup> According to a former government official, *“Covid has shown that issues of gender, gender inequality that is perpetuated by customary norms is still very present and at any time, where men and women are placed in close proximity of one another – there will be violence.”*<sup>58</sup> The restrictions on movement and lockdowns put women at a higher risk of SGBV and abuse, and from the time the lockdowns were imposed, rates of SGBV increased.<sup>59</sup> Men and boys were left with no job opportunities,<sup>60</sup> particularly those dependent on casual jobs who found themselves locked at home and unable to provide for their families, leading to frustration.<sup>61</sup> Before the pandemic, even if they had no jobs, male members of the family would be out of the house, sitting under trees and playing games and chatting. Remaining at home with women and children was a new, and often unwelcome, experience with some men turning to alcohol and violence in the home to assuage their frustrations.<sup>62</sup>

“Covid-19 has become really dangerous for women,” said Flora, a community organiser for ONAD, based in South Sudan’s capital Juba. “It has closed many businesses, including tea shops, where women work. Women are more exposed to the virus because of their social responsibilities to take care of the sick and go to crowded marketplaces to buy food for their families.”

Businesses that have been forced to close due to the virus are those in more precarious sectors, such as tea stalls or vegetable sales, often run by women. Flora worries that because the pandemic has cut off the already limited options for women to make a living in South Sudan it has forced some into sexual exploitation. “We have cases of rape and harassment of vulnerable women who need money” she said.

Source: “It is like another war”: confronting gender-based violence amid COVID-19 in South Sudan, Saferworld, July 2020

<sup>56</sup> Awolich AA (2021), [COVID-19 and the Political Transition in South Sudan](#), The Sudd Institute.

<sup>57</sup> UNWOMEN (2020), ‘A Rapid gender analysis on covid 19 in South Sudan’.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with a former state-level government official, South Sudan, woman, 22 January 2021

<sup>59</sup> OECD Development Policy Papers, [Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations](#), Paper No. 8, December 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Interview, Hon. Janet Aya Alex, Member of the Revitalized Transitional National Assembly, representing Morobo Country of Central Equatoria, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Interview, Hon. Sadia Lorna, former Minister of Education and Finance for the Central Equatoria State government, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Interview, Adut Daniel, Programme Officer for the Federation of Women Lawyers – South Sudan, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

## The role of the aid sector in addressing gendered drivers of conflict

As South Sudan's National Policy on Gender recognises, "although women are the main producers of food, women and children are the most vulnerable to food insecurity because of traditional gender roles that limit their access to and control of productive assets".<sup>63</sup> Not surprisingly, there has been greater emphasis by donors and aid agencies on supporting women's empowerment, with particular focus on expanding women's economic opportunities and access to education for girls. Additionally, gender has been mainstreamed across the humanitarian response, with the [Humanitarian Response Plan \(HRP\) 2022](#) specifically identifying the Centrality of Protection and the Gender and Inclusion Road Map at the core of the response, especially preventing and responding to gender-based violence, with particular attention paid to women's SGBV and protection needs.<sup>64</sup> Across both longer-term and humanitarian programming, there are efforts to build capacity on human rights, respond to and prevent SGBV, empower women and support girls' access to education, encourage women's participation in decision making and enhance economic opportunities for women and young people are common.

Gender equality programmes often assume that supporting gender-based development will contribute to lasting peace. At the same time, conflict analysis often does not systematically integrate gender analysis. As a result, both fail to connect a conflict-sensitive approach with gender equality programming. It is important to recognise that men's experiences, particularly young men's, can also be one of marginalisation and of being a victim of violence, albeit less frequently than women, and in a different manner.<sup>65</sup> Is there sufficient nuanced understanding amongst donors and aid agencies of the pervasiveness of gender inequality, the entrenched gender norms perpetuate it, and how to effectively engage with *both* genders? Do we bring our own 'baggage' and assumptions about women's and men's roles, as evidenced by the DDR example above? Evidence would suggest that women are often portrayed as victims, lacking agency, while men are often seen only as perpetrators and powerful. This overlooks the complex and nuanced gender relationships and interactions between men and women, and their intersectional identities: young, old, urban, rural, wealthy, poor, able bodied, disabled or identity group.

There is a reluctance to address violent masculinities specifically, even though they are often used to foment violence and conflict to further other interests. For there to be a real progress in challenging and changing harmful gender norms, all programmes, not just gender focused ones, need to be based on an understanding of the different experiences, priorities, frustrations and concerns of women,

### Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) and Gender sensitivity?

When designing and implementing DDR programming, it is crucial that lessons are learned from women's experience with previous South Sudanese initiatives. The design of the 2006-2011 DDR programme relied heavily on lessons learned from Sierra Leone and Liberia, which pointed to the need to prioritise the demobilisation of Women Associated with Armed Forces (WAAF). The all-male leadership of the SPLA, who were sceptical of DDR, were happy to accommodate this initiative, which enabled the removal of swathes of women from the payroll.

Unlike in West Africa, however, the SPLA were not a vanquished group and the women in the SPLA did not see themselves in the definition of WAAF. They were angry at being ejected from the army, one of the few salaried opportunities available at that time. As a result, the very DDR process that the international community espoused as gender-sensitive was actually the reverse, denying women the same opportunities as their male counterparts. Furthermore, the programme re-enforced gendered norms in South Sudan that saw women's primary role as looking after the family and household, and men's primary role as breadwinners and protectors.

Source: Stone, Lydia (2011), '[Failures and Opportunities: Rethinking DDR in South Sudan](#)', May.

<sup>63</sup> Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare (2013), 'National Gender Policy', Juba: Government of the Republic of South Sudan, p 35 (sourced from: <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/laenderprofile/317971/south-sudanese-women>)

<sup>64</sup> OCHA (2022), '[Humanitarian Response Plan South Sudan 2022](#)', March.

<sup>65</sup> Bennett J, et. al., op. cit.

men, girls, and boys and how much violent masculinities continue to drive conflict. Gender specific programmes need to be explicit in their intentions to work with *both* women and men if they are to have an impact on changing gender norms. Care must be taken to ensure that if programmes do specifically target girls and women, they do not create conflict and cause tensions because young men feel neglected and overlooked. It is vital to ensure that any programme is based on a thorough [gender-sensitive conflict analysis](#). This will help donors and implementing agencies to have a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how they could effectively engage women, as well as men, particularly young men, in a way that addresses the underlying drivers of conflict, and meet both the immediate and longer-term priorities of communities where they work.

## Conclusion

Without initiatives that specifically target and engage with men and boys, alongside women and girls, the aid community will struggle to effectively tackle deeply rooted, harmful gender norms and roles that perpetuate cycles of violence and marginalisation. Seeing potential programmes only through a women/girls lens and focusing primarily on improving girls' access to education or women's economic and livelihoods opportunities gives the impression that men's and boy's ability to access similar opportunities is less important.<sup>66</sup> Addressing the issues that women and girls face is vital for South Sudan's long-term development, but if this is perceived as the only priority for the aid community, it will fuel resentment among men and boys, who often also feel marginalised and disempowered. Recognising that women and girls, while a very important group, are not the only vulnerable and disenfranchised group in South Sudan is critical to ensuring the viability of any programming in South Sudan. Not only will a gender-blind approach be detrimental to building a supportive environment for peace in South Sudan, but at its core this is gender and conflict insensitive. An intersectional approach that seeks to understand the interplay between gender and conflict is imperative to designing and implementing long-term solutions that seek to address existing gender disparities and unequal power distribution within South Sudan.

## Recommendations

- **Purposefully integrate gender sensitivity and conflict analysis into the planning, design, and implementation of both humanitarian and longer-term programmes.** Gender analysis is integral to conflict sensitivity. Analysis that only looks at how conflict negatively affects women or girls is inadequate and perpetuates the one-dimensional narrative that all women are 'victims', without agency, and that all men, particularly young men, are uniformly powerful perpetrators. This binary portrayal belies the complex social and cultural interactions between gender roles, gender norms and conflict. An intersectional, rather than binary, approach to gendered programming in South Sudan will benefit both genders and contribute to addressing inequities based on social position, economic situation, and political influence, not simply gender. Prioritising opportunities for women and girls, to the detriment of men and boys, risks driving conflict and violence, and fuelling resentment between men and women in South Sudan, with women and girls often suffering the direst consequences. With a deeper and nuanced understanding of this interplay interventions can be designed that effectively address the drivers of both gender inequality and conflict.
- **Ensure that peacebuilding and Rule of Law (RoL) programmes do not reinforce gender stereotypes.** Legislation and representation at the national level is not indicative of improved gender equality, as customary law often governs, and reinforces, harmful gendered social practices.<sup>67</sup> The use of customary law in South Sudan is widespread and it frequently ignores national legislation that

<sup>66</sup> Oxfam International (2017), '[South Sudan Gender Analysis, A snapshot situation analysis of the differential impact of the humanitarian crisis on women, girls, men and boys in South Sudan March–July 2016](#)', March.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with civil society representatives, women, held separately on 15 and 19 January 2021.

attempts to address gendered inequality. At the same time, it is often the only legal system that many South Sudanese are familiar with and trust, despite its limitations. In addition, programmes based on assumptions relevant for other contexts can reinforce gender stereotypes or roles in South Sudan. Gender-sensitive conflict analysis will allow aid actors to better understand the barriers and opportunities for working with formal and customary authorities to challenge 'normative' gender roles that limit opportunities for both women and men. Using this knowledge to inform community violence reduction and RoL policy and programming decisions is critical for ending the current culture of impunity, particularly with regards to GBV, women and girls' protection, and the recruitment of young men into militias. In addition to this, donors should continue to advocate with the government and other security stakeholders at the local, sub-national and national levels to increase uptake on gender-sensitive access to security and justice.

- **Capitalise on existing expertise on gender and conflict analysis.** There are several UN agencies, INGOs and NNGOs that have expertise in conflict, gender, or both. Purposely drawing on and learning from the expertise and experience within these agencies to inform programmes and policies will help to build broader knowledge within the aid community on the linkages between gender inequality and conflict.
- **Invest in policies and programmes that are youth-focused, particularly those that empower young women and young men, and are a win-win for both.** Youth unemployment is a rising issue in South Sudan, and given the current demographics and prevailing economic situation, will only worsen over time. While the Government of South Sudan is ultimately responsible for creating an enabling security and policy environment for job creation, livelihood opportunities and access to services that young people are looking for, the aid community cannot ignore its position within the economy and communities as a key source of jobs and skills. Programmes, hiring policies and other initiatives that demonstrate one's gender is not a barrier to opportunities could provide both young women and young men with the skills needed to take up non-traditional gender roles.
- **Partner with a wide range of South Sudanese civil society organisations (CSOs), including research organisations and universities, to better understand harmful gender norms, such as violent masculinities.** High staff turnover among international staff working for donors or aid agencies is a common challenge across the sector. As a result, few senior managers have the in-depth knowledge about gender roles or harmful gender norms needed to make informed decisions. On the other hand, most South Sudanese are intimately familiar with gender norms in South Sudan. Proactively tapping into the knowledge and experiences of South Sudanese working for CSOs, research organisations and universities would both bolster the knowledge of international staff, and create the incentive for South Sudanese to reflect on how gender norms can shape, for better or worse, South Sudan's future.

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