

## CSRF Analysis: South Sudanese Women Negotiating Agency in Conflict Resolution

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### Summary

Women in South Sudan are subject to limited access to political, economic, social resources due to the country's rigid patriarchal structure. Nevertheless, women have been negotiating their agency and influence for decades, playing a crucial role in state-building, peacebuilding, and development processes. Beyond their formal role as agents of peace, considering the informal dimensions through which South Sudanese women influence peace and conflict are vastly significant for aid actors to grasp conflict dynamics and the untapped potential of women's participation and influence. This analysis provides insights into the diverse roles that women hold in South Sudanese society, their challenges and negotiated access and influence. The analysis will vastly focus on informal process and will provide practical recommendations for aid workers and peacebuilders.

### State of affairs on the role of women in South Sudan

South Sudan is characterised by a patriarchal social structure, which predefines and dictates access to political, economic, and social resources in accordance with ascribed gender roles.<sup>1</sup>

Women are expected to fulfil traditional gender role of caregivers, as much as men are meant to be the providers and head of the household. As such, marriage can be described as the lynchpin of South Sudanese society and is crucially linked with the challenges and opportunities women have in negotiating access to decision-making and gain agency within their family and communities. This extends to women's access to political, social, and economic decision-making and opportunities within the wider South Sudanese context.<sup>2</sup>

The social status of women and men is reliant on their marital status and ability to fulfil their traditional roles within said marriage, as well as their extended roles within the wider family and community. The inability to fulfil their roles and the interconnected responsibilities translates into

a loss or lowering of social status within the community's eyes. As highlighted below, community's perception is a particularly crucial aspect for both men and particularly for women to negotiate access to formal and informal decision-making processes. To fulfil sociocultural expectations, women are expected, for instance, to de-prioritise education after marriage – a major barrier to women's advancement towards gender equality in the country.<sup>3</sup> This directly translates into low literacy rates among women, which average at 20%, much lower than the 38% for men.<sup>4</sup> The perceived secondary importance of women's education is further reinforced by the expectation that women do not need to enter the workforce. Men are expected to be the "breadwinners" and women to rely on their husbands and their husbands' families for financial sustenance.

Shifts from this set role have been witnessed in the last decade. For instance, women – mostly in urban areas – have been joining the workforce. The reality for most women however remains a complete lack of financial independence, lack of inclusion in decision making on the use of

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<sup>1</sup> Spring, D., and Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility Team (2023), [CSRF Meta-Analysis: Gender](#)

<sup>2</sup> Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (2022), [Gender norms, conflict sensitivity and transition in South Sudan](#)

<sup>3</sup> Kumalo, L., and Roddy-Mullineaux, C. (2019), [Sustaining peace: harnessing the power of South Sudanese women](#)

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation – UNESCO (2022), [Country Profiles: South Sudan](#)

resources, and being often faced with unequal laws, particularly prevailing customary laws, such as that on property and land ownership rights. Women are in fact not granted the right to own property, and, at the husband's passing, their property would have to be managed by a male relative.<sup>5</sup> This element presents a particular challenge in the face of continued cycles of violence and forced displacement across the country, resulting in a high incidence of women-headed families,<sup>6</sup> within which women find themselves having to suddenly become the primary provider. In such instances, mothers struggle to enter the job market, and the burden of caregiver responsibilities within their households are transferred to their daughters – once again, at the expense of their education.<sup>7</sup>

Marriage also represents an important financial concern for the bride and groom's families, leading to family pressure on women to marry and on men to "perform" what are perceived as their masculine duties in order to secure a wife. Once a woman marries, the husband's family becomes responsible for her. That is to say that the family of origin will have one less member to feed. In a country with extreme levels of poverty, this can lead to the diffusion of the practice of early or forced marriage as families are compelled to marry their daughters off as early as possible in an attempt to cope with poverty and vulnerability.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, in pastoralist communities, the practice of "bride-price"<sup>9</sup> is still prominent, as men must pay a financial price (usually cattle and livestock) upon marriage to the bride's family, which will then be distributed to her relatives. The bride-price holds great significance in the

understanding of gender relation in South Sudan: as highlighted in later chapters, men are pressured to secure the bride-price and face ridicule should they not be able to do so, and similarly women are pressured into remaining within their marriage (despite possible unfavourable situations) because if she leaves, her family would have to return her bride price.<sup>10</sup> The latter aspect presents an important concern given the high levels of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in South Sudan, which has negative consequences on women's confidence – cultural and direct – due to the normalisation of physical, psychological, and social harm.<sup>11</sup>

As elements of women's bargaining to access spaces of influence will be discussed, it is important to note that there is a spectrum of challenges and strategies that can be implemented by women in this context to access gender equality. These are dependent on a number of secondary dimensions of privileges related to the women's different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, identity group, family ties, as well as their location in the country (rural vs. urban, but also across different states).

## Women negotiating spaces of influence

Women make up approximately fifty percent<sup>12</sup> of South Sudan's population, however, they are subject to economic, social, political, and financial inequality. Attempts have been made since the country's independence in 2011 to achieve better gender equality,<sup>13</sup> a notable example being the

<sup>5</sup> CARE (2020), [South Sudan: Gender in Brief](#)

<sup>6</sup> Buchanan, E. (2019), [No Simple Solutions: Women, Displacement and Durable Solutions in South Sudan](#)

<sup>7</sup> Plan International (2017), [South Sudan crisis forces girls out of school](#)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. ; CARE (2020), [South Sudan: Gender in Brief](#)

<sup>9</sup> Pospisil, J., Johnston, M., et al. (2024), [Bring Enough Cows to Marry: Brideprice, Conflict, and Gender Relations in South Sudan](#)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> SIHA Network (2024), [An Analysis of the Realities of SGBV in Wau \(Western Bahar El Ghazal\), South Sudan](#) ; Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan (2022), [Conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls in South Sudan](#)

<sup>12</sup> The World Bank (2022), [Population, female \(% of total population\) – South Sudan](#)

<sup>13</sup> Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (2022), [Gender norms, conflict sensitivity and transition in South Sudan](#), p.7 ; United States Institute of Peace (2011),

2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which stipulated that women should hold 35% of positions within the executive branch as well as all levels of decision-making processes, including within the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (JMEC), the monitoring body tasked with overseeing of the implementation of the R-ARCSS itself.<sup>14</sup> These numbers/commitments have largely remained unfulfilled: women's participation remains generally limited, and, where present, it is largely tokenistic, marginal, and still accessible only in accordance with secondary dimensions of privilege.<sup>15</sup> An important distinction here therefore must be made on the difference between presence in these spheres of influence and active participation: traditionally women are not considered to be actors that should be participating in decision-making processes, and while at least their presence is now formally recognised as a necessity, their ability to influence these processes and to advocate for their needs still remains elusive. Additionally, while these legislative provisions for women's participation were adopted at the national level, the situation remains rather dire outside of urban areas, in marginalized and rural communities, where customary law and traditions still hold strong.

More generally, women in South Sudan must and do negotiate and identify informal access to spaces of influence within their community to gain a modicum of agency within the country's recurring national and localised cycles of conflict. An introduction to this phenomenon will be the focus of the later chapters.

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<sup>14</sup> Kezie-Nwoha, H., and Were, J. (2018), [Women's informal peace efforts: Grassroots activism in South Sudan](#)

<sup>15</sup> UN Women – Africa (2023), [Women's Leadership and Political Participation Project Launched](#)

## Women as agents of conflict

Given the country's violent history, South Sudan is a largely militarised society. As in other aspects of life, violence seeps into the definition of traditional gender roles. Particularly in rural communities, men who can fight are held to high regard and identified as examples of ideal masculinity, while women are perceived as either conduits for affirmation of men's masculinity – via marriage, a necessary step for men to properly achieve their manhood, or as victims upon which they can exercise more violence (SGBV, for instance).<sup>16</sup> This view of women's role, however, provides a rather limited and inaccurate picture of how women exercise and negotiate their agency within this framework.

Women have learned to utilise the rigid structures of South Sudanese patriarchal, militarised society to gain their own influence as agents of conflict – whether in agreement or attempted opposition to their traditionally ascribed gender roles. These was achieved in a number of ways. For instance, women have reportedly been instigators of violence by reinforcing the social importance of entrenched gender practices.<sup>17</sup> An example of this, is interlinked with the aforementioned practice of bride price: in order to afford paying the family of the bride, men may have to recur to cattle raiding and inter-communal conflicts. Women traditionally play an active role in inciting violence and encouraging men to fight by singing songs that praise fighting virtues such as bravery and prowess, and denouncing cowardice as unmanly.<sup>18</sup> As such, women actively contribute to the definition of masculinity, linking men's desirability with their ability to perpetuate violence, while also contributing to the de-masculinisation of those men who will not or are

<sup>16</sup> United Nations – UN News (2022), [South Sudan: 'hellish existence' for women and girls, new UN report reveals](#)

<sup>17</sup> Life and Peace Institute (2023), [Challenging Norms: Marginalised Women and Informal Peacebuilding in South Sudan](#)

<sup>18</sup> Santschi, M., Reverend James Ninrew Dong (2023), [Working together for peace: Lessons learned from supporting local conflict prevention & resolution](#), p. 15.

unable to successfully participate in such acts. These men are quickly marked as cowards and overall viewed unfavourably by the community, mainly for their inability to exercise their traditional gender role.<sup>19</sup>

In opposition with said gender roles, South Sudanese women also attempt to gain agency and empowerment by joining armed groups.<sup>20</sup> While higher degree of independence may be true, women are still excluded from decision-making processes even within the group and remain subjected to high risks of SGBV. In an attempt to answer the former issue, the Women's Network for South Sudan People's Defence Forces was launched in 2022 intending to create a platform for women to better advocate for themselves and realise their rights to gender equality in the defence forces. The creation of this network responds to one of the direct needs of women in the armed forces, which is that of being recognised for their rank – regardless of their gender.<sup>21</sup>

Once these women leave the armed group and attempt reintegration within local communities, ex-combatants carry a significant amount of stigma for having “crossed the lines of femininity”,<sup>22</sup> and going against the traditional role ascribed to women. As a result, women ex-combatants often live as pariahs within the new community, effectively worsening their already marginalised status as women.

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<sup>19</sup> Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (2022), [Gender norms, conflict sensitivity and transition in South Sudan](#)

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Development Programme - UNDP (2023), [Baseline Study on the Reintegration Status, Challenges and Opportunities of Former Combatants, Women and Children Formerly Associated with Armed Groups in South Sudan](#), p. 85.

<sup>21</sup> UN Women – Africa (2022), [“Don't stop your girl from joining the military” – South Sudan People's Defense Forces Women's Network launched in Juba, South Sudan](#)

<sup>22</sup> United Nations Development Programme - UNDP (2023), [Baseline Study on the Reintegration Status, Challenges and Opportunities of Former Combatants,](#)

## Women as informal agents for peace

Women have played a crucial role in the independence struggle in South Sudan and continue to be pivotal in the peace processes at the national and local levels.<sup>23</sup> As informal agents of peace, women have negotiated their role both within, adjacent, or outside their traditional gender roles, and these can be described by their participation in grassroots female-led mobilisation, activist organisations, religious leaders, and more traditional spaces within South Sudanese culture.

### *Donor-funded or lead informal platforms for women engagement*

Women-focused and women-led organisations and grassroots mobilisation are a pillar of South Sudanese society. Primarily, their work is pivotal to the advancement of women empowerment and security in the country.<sup>24</sup> In fact, these movements provide a first response to issues affecting women: they provide shelter, sustenance, healthcare services and support to victims of SGBV, but they are also fora for women to increase their capacity and discuss shared issues.<sup>25</sup> While these organisations may have taken shape around a variety of different issues and interests,<sup>26</sup> they all contribute to create spaces for women to make their voice heard, to support each other, or to gain necessary skills to negotiate their role within these spaces of influence.

[Women and Children Formerly Associated with Armed Groups in South Sudan](#), p. 84

<sup>23</sup> Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (2022), [Gender norms, conflict sensitivity and transition in South Sudan](#), p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> United Nations, [Women's Experiences in the South Sudan Peace Process 2013-2018](#)

<sup>25</sup> Kezie-Nwoha, H., and Were, J. (2018), [Women's informal peace efforts: Grassroots activism in South Sudan](#), p.3; United Nations Mission in South Sudan (2019), [Women grassroots in Juba discuss gender-related provisions of the Revitalised Peace Agreement](#)

<sup>26</sup> E.g., organised around religion, motherhood, economic empowerment, etc. Kezie-Nwoha, H. (2022), [Women and Grassroots Peacebuilding in South Sudan](#)

A number of these organisations target specifically women who act as informal agents for peace. An example are organisations that foster women participation in peace mediation and conflict prevention, carrying out advocacy and providing capacity building resources and trainings to empower women to take on a more active role in this male-dominated field.<sup>27</sup> At the national level, initiatives built by women for women’s participation and to advocate women issues are particularly valuable, as they also keep the government accountable and to ensure that women’s interests are advanced in the pursuit of lasting and sustainable peace.<sup>28</sup>

*Informal, traditional, and cultural platforms for women engagement*

Women peace activists as informal agents of peace have been a constant presence in South Sudan, in particular at the local level. Women have been recognised to be able to cross religious, ethnic, community, and tribal lines in their effort to promote peace.<sup>29</sup> Women, for instance, are reported to mediate disputes related to “women issues”, such as cases of SGBV that would have otherwise escalated into intra-communal conflict.<sup>30</sup> The work of women in mediation and conflict prevention goes beyond what are considered women’s issues, and – more broadly – women have been crucial in carrying out local negotiations in times of conflict. Within the scope of traditional warfare customs of South Sudan, women are considered neutral parties, and thus they can move between communities in conflict to facilitate communication in order to reach an

agreement.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, women play a role in local trade, moving between communities buying and selling mostly food items particularly fruits, vegetables from local producers, in so doing they promote positive relationships between communities.

Within the framework of traditional roles that women have leveraged to influence peace processes the element of faith features quite strongly. Women have utilised the platform that leading prayers and church-related organisations provide as a conduit to raise awareness against conflict, to advocate for peaceful resolution of disputes, and to better the condition of South Sudanese women by developing programmes for their support and economic empowerment.<sup>32</sup>

Another important use of a traditional and foundational aspect of South Sudanese life that women have been able to leverage for peace is the respect that comes with age. Age stratification is a pillar across many South Sudanese communities. Among the Murle, men<sup>33</sup> are divided into “age-sets”, and fighting among the youngest age-sets is not uncommon to assert an age-set’s dominance. The Murle women’s *Kabarze*, a recent practice that emerged in 2017, ensures that elderly women are grouped together to address age-set conflicts.<sup>34</sup> The *Kabarze* present an opportunity for women to exercise their influence to advocate for peace – as they have a

<sup>27</sup> Women’s International Peace Centre and Just Future (2023), [Putting Women at the Centre of South Sudan’s Peace and Security Agenda: Insights from Civil Society’s Engagement with the African Union’s Peace and Security Council](#), p.6

<sup>28</sup> SIHA Network (2023), [Statement: Voices of women on peace By the undersigned South Sudanese women peace activists and organizations](#); International Civil Society Action Network (2024), [“We Rise for a Peaceful South Sudan”: The Role of Women in Shaping Post-War South Sudan](#)

<sup>29</sup> The Sudd Institute (2015), [The Role of Women in Peace-Building in South Sudan](#), p.3

<sup>30</sup> Santschi, M., Reverend James Ninrew Dong (2023), [Working together for peace: Lessons learned from supporting local conflict prevention & resolution](#), p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>32</sup> SIHA Network (2023), [Statement: Voices of women on peace By the undersigned South Sudanese women peace activists and organizations](#); Sr. Paola Moggi, SMC (2018), [South Sudan: Step by step, women of the Gospel weave peace](#)

<sup>33</sup> N.b., women belong to their father’s age-set until they marry, then they become part of their husband’s. Diana Felix Da Costa, [Age-Sets](#);

<sup>34</sup> Diana Felix Da Costa (2022), [The Kabarze: a novel platform for women’s involvement in age-set tensions](#)

vested interest in the cessation of the hostilities as mothers.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to these mediums of informal influence that women exercise to advocate for peace, there are also individual, community-specific examples. These are women who find themselves to be held as highly respected members of their communities, for different reasons, and thus are granted more influential power. In these cases, women considered role models, gaining some form of informal leadership position within their community. These could be women related to influential men, but also those who have left a positive impression on the community. In such cases, it is curious to note that women are to a certain extent forgiven for stepping outside of traditional gender roles to continue providing a service to the community and acting as a role model. It is however crucial to note the intersectional nature of such privilege: the eligibility of women to be recognised by their community in such a light is reliant on their age, education level, their social and family status, as well as other personal concerns such as the stability and status of their marriage, etc.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that South Sudanese society has made great progress in embracing the changing role of women in spaces outside of their traditional gender roles, in parallel of more women being able to gain an education and being exposed to other opportunities to serve their communities.

### **Challenges to women in spaces of influence**

Challenges to women's agency and participation in spaces of influence are steep and multifaceted in the South Sudanese context. These changes are in accordance with women's socioeconomic and ethnic factors, their family ties, location, and age. The aid sector should be aware of and tackle both widespread limitations and those specific to different groups.

The overall most crucial challenge for women's participation and negotiation of influence is linked to prerogatives ingrained in traditional gender roles. Among these, the most obvious ones are that even if interested to participate, women have limited time available due to their household responsibility and require spousal or a male relative's permission to be able to attend these activities. Buy-in from the community is thus pivotal to somewhat overcome these obstacles. A connected challenge of gender inequality ingrained in South Sudanese society is the low degree of literacy among women and girls. While this obstacle may have less impact in more traditional structures, illiteracy poses an important challenge for political participation as well as activism for which a minimum requirement of education is required. Additionally, literacy is a non-negotiable when it comes to access to funding for grassroots movements and organisations, leaving women-led efforts unsuitable to secure the necessary funds for their running. In order to overcome the barrier of illiteracy, it is observed that affected civil society groups operating at grassroots level rely on external efforts to acquire funds or on in-kind donations.

Funding overall and sustainability are another challenge to women's participation and agency. Funding set aside in support for female-led grassroots mobilization efforts and organizations is scarce. That is in addition to the already shrinking donor landscape already being witnessed across the aid sector in South Sudan more broadly. Therefore, while it is already difficult for women-led efforts to even meet the eligibility requirements, the funds that they have access to are quite limited – both in scope, but more importantly also in time. The latter presents an important element that aid actors must consider, that of sustainability. A number of funded programs have in fact imploded following the end of the funding cycle, as not enough attention was paid to capacity building and the creation of

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<sup>35</sup> Diana Felix Da Costa (2022), [The Kabarze: a novel platform for women's involvement in age-set tensions](#)

sustainable models. Another important challenge to consider related to programming is its inconsistency. Given the restraints in availability and durability of funds, programming around women participation often does not follow a holistic approach geared towards long-term goals to achieve better participation in a given area, but rather develops into a patch-work sequence of different and disjunct projects.

There are also other cultural and political elements that may present a challenge to women's agency and participation. Where such initiatives are created, participation becomes subject to these norms. For example, it has been the case that men have refused to take part in women-led initiatives as they are not seen of value or perceived to threaten their dominant social role. Similarly, a degree of mistrust also stems from other women within a community that perceive women participating in such initiatives as stepping away and betraying their traditional role by negotiating a leadership position. There is then a social cost for women who decide to participate in such initiatives. Depending on the socio-economic context, this mistrust can also escalate to fuel class divide.

Alongside its patriarchal social structure, South Sudanese society also functions in accordance with an age hierarchy, reducing young people, especially young women,<sup>36</sup> to a marginalised role within decision-making processes. The experience of this phenomenon is particularly negative for young women and girls who experience high levels of marginalisation and have their needs ignored both by men and older women. This element would beg for a more thorough analysis of how young people – both men and women, boys and girls – can negotiate their agency.

Lastly, a concrete challenge to women's mobilisation, participation, and agency is the continuous cycles of violence being witnessed in South Sudan, especially at sub-national level. Given the polarisation that was caused by the

recent civil war, any type of mobilisation can be considered dangerous by different groups and can pose a concrete threat to the well-being and safety of participants.

## Conclusion

Despite the significant challenges and restrictions women face in South Sudan, they have consistently been negotiating their agency and influence in matters of peace and conflict. Their impact in formal and informal processes must be recognized by the communities, as well as aid actors. Beyond their stereotypically ascribed role as victims of the cycle of violence, women have indeed been carving out their influence for decades. Women can mobilize for conflict, by reinforcing entrenched social practices of masculinity and inciting men to violence. Women can also mobilize for peace, within their traditional roles as women, mothers, women of faith, or beyond these gendered notions as community mobilisers, mediators, community role-models and leaders.

Despite the different roles that women can play when it comes to peace or conflict, it is important to note that these are defined and restricted by the secondary dimensions of privilege and marginalisation of individuals, i.e., their socioeconomic, political, financial, ethnic backgrounds.

## Recommendations for donors and aid agencies to support the role of women in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding aid in more conflict-sensitive ways

- **Aid actors should recognise and intentionally support the subtle and informal role that women play in peace processes.** It is essential that the aid actors recognise the crucial role of women in peace processes, both in accordance and leveraging their traditional

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<sup>36</sup> Search for Common Ground (2021), [The Women Peacebuilders who are Reshaping South Sudan](#)

gender role. Women, particularly older women, can and already do play a central role mobilising as mothers, respected role models and elders in their communities, including in the particular role of church leaders, in civic education and awareness-raising to foster and encourage peace within and across communities. This important agency and role must be acknowledged by humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors and actively supported and integrated in their programming. This will not only provide a more veritable and holistic understanding of the local context, but also encourage women's engagement – formal and informal – in this positive direction.

- **Aid actors should be more conscious of how women are engaged to ensure a contextually and conflict sensitive approach.** The engagement of women by humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding aid actors in South Sudan is fundamental for sustainable peace across the country. However, it is crucial for aid actors to conduct thorough context and conflict analyses, as well as analysis of gender and communal dynamics in the given locality. Only a nuanced understanding of the local reality will allow for a positive engagement of women in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding programming, that also ensures the safety of women involved. This aspect begs particular attention as women engagement can be perceived as an attempted subversion of traditional gender roles, and result in exposing participating women to a heightened risk of SGBV. Additionally, given the optics of engagement, the safeguarding of the perception and image in the eyes of the community of women participating in programming should always be considered.
- **Aid actors should develop a nurturing model (more flexible and sustainable) to support women's local efforts for peace.** A widespread and crucial challenge for women's organisations and other grassroots

efforts for peace is sustainability. Firstly, direct accessibility to all sources of funding (especially international ones) is rather difficult for such women-led initiatives, whether due to language barriers, low-level of literacy, as well as steep financial requirements women are often unable to meet due to the societal structure of South Sudanese society. Secondly, where awarded, funding is often rather low, and only short-lived. This results in funded initiatives to only last as long as the funding is secured because of lack of sustainability ingrained in such programmes. As such, aid actors should develop a nurturing model that caters for growth of women's capacity and works towards the sustainability of such initiatives in a context and conflict sensitive approach.

- **Aid actors should focus on structural challenges to women's agency in conflict resolution, particularly young women and girls' access to education.** It is essential that structural challenges that prevent women from effectively negotiating agency and gaining decision-making power be addressed. These are multi-faceted and contextual, e.g., across social and economic status, or rural/urban contexts. However, pervasive challenges that can be encountered across the South Sudanese context, and that fall within the scope of international intervention should be addressed. A clear example is education, given the high level of illiteracy of women and girls in South Sudan. This is the result of a number of factors, including the pervasive cycles of violence witnessed across the country. However, elements born from entrenched gender dynamics should be focused on and tackled. These can be, for instance, unequal expectations and labour expected of children within the household (young girls are expected to carry out housework alongside their mothers), child or forced early marriage which forces girls and women out of education before they are ready.

- **Aid actors should focus more broadly on tackling structural elements of gendered dynamics that can be weaponised for conflict.** Marriage, especially in rural communities, is linked with practices (such as cattle raiding to secure the bride price, young-forced marriage, cases of SGBV and the weaponisation of rape) that can fuel inter-communal conflict. Aid actors should acknowledge the prominence of these underlying factors and develop programming that exercises a wholistic approach in reducing risk factor and promoting culturally sensitive shifts geared towards better safety and security for women and girls. An alternative and culturally accepted notions of both masculinity and femininity should be worked towards, that focuses on non-violence and gender equality.
- **Lastly, aid actors should focus their efforts on women's economic empowerment, a *sine qua non* to achieve better women participation.** Women's economic independence and empowerment is key to their effective participation at all levels of the workforce and to reducing poverty. Economic independence or empowerment would provide the foundations needed to build women's confidence, paramount for their participation in decision-making processes. In fact, beyond the purely financial aspect, economic empowerment would have a considerable impact on the psychological and societal normalisation of SGBV – economically empowered or independent women may be less likely to remain in a marriage where she has to withstand violence. It is crucial, however, for aid actors to develop economic empowerment programme that place at the forefront women's safety: women participating in such programmes can face higher risks of SGBV as retaliation for what might be perceived as an attempt to break away from their role. To mitigate this risk, it is paramount that men are also engaged in programmes focusing on women's economic empowerment. By working on a mindset shift and raising awareness on the importance of

women's economic independence among men, it will be safer for women to participate in such programming and have long-term benefits in the acceptance of women's new role within their families and communities.