

# ASSESSMENT OF SOUTH SUDAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT (1980-2018)





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republic of South Sudan is a product of many years of armed resistance by the southerners and, finally, the split of the former Nation of Sudan into two different countries. This has a long history dating back to the 1970s with the launch of the Anyanya movement and its military wing that led the armed rebellion. Although more tribal violence between the political and tribal militia in the country resurfaced in 2017 due to the collapse of the Salva Kiir – Riek Machar coalition government, new regional peace settlements promise to tackle the intermittent instability in the country.

The women's experience in Southern Sudan is replete with gendered forms of female political subjectivity, citizenship, and activism. As this study will shortly illustrate, in their efforts to participate equally in the country's national development, women are still trapped in the

history of violence and religious-cultural bottlenecks that impede such progress. Nevertheless, local women activists, leaders, and an array of international stakeholders work undeterred in bringing together women to fight for a better future.

The nature of political formations and civilian recruitment into the violent ethnic militia has created a complex conflict relationship that has undoubtedly affected women adversely. The interstate differences have also added to the complexities of civil strife and violent crimes such as cattle rustling and gender-based violence. In other words, the conflict history of the country continues to pose a significant challenge to women's empowerment in South Sudan, even though remarkable changes have been happening.

---

## KEY POINTS

*(Sudanese women confront impediments against building a solid foundation for democracy in the country and push through their political participation in government, Cultural traditions, religion, and ingrained poverty militates against women's empowerment in Sudan, the Jaffey Numeiry regime in the 1980s developed a basis for State led women's participation in development based on Marxist feminism, the post-conflict situation in Sudan has degraded essential social services, NGO partners and women leaders are involved in rebuilding gender empowerment opportunities to improve the lives of women)*

---

# COUNTY CONTEXT

South Sudan is a clear example of how civil wars (1955 to 1972) and (1983–2005) can devastate a national service delivery infrastructure. South Sudan is still considered one of the least-developed places in the world.<sup>1</sup> The almost universal shortage of essential services has left generations of South Sudanese unable to achieve high levels of formal education, health and hygienic conditions, shelter, or even predictable food security.

The lack of essential services makes it extremely difficult for women to raise children or provide for their families. It complicates their access to the most necessities. Health services across South Sudan are inadequate. Hospitals and clinics are available only in the main cities and towns. The lack of good road infrastructure and public transport compounds the shortage of health facilities. And while women desire schools where their children can learn and later join the workforce, neither formal learning nor vocational training institutions are available or adequate to meet the demand (UNICEF, 2016).

This debilitating environment has left women in South Sudan to shoulder most of the responsibilities for the well-being of their families. In both the years of active war and after, women played essential roles in keeping some social services going, taking over where public infrastructure had failed, sometimes because the male breadwinners died or were away in the wars. Nevertheless, such contributions seem never to have been valued significantly (Sørensen, 1998).

The consequences of the conflicts produced a high number of female-headed households in Sudan. It has therefore become increasingly necessary for women to earn an income or work outside of the home to supplement their spouses' incomes (Bouta et al., 2005). With men away at war or deceased, women took on the responsibilities that their husbands or other male family members had, including becoming financially responsible for their families. As a result, women have initiated ways to create work for themselves in the informal sector through income-generating activities

and small-scale trading in markets to earn a living. They also tend to agriculture or engage in paid labor outside the home. This increased participation of women in the economic affairs of the family has increased their confidence and overall visibility on issues of politics and national development (Supra, 92).

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed in 2005, signaled a dawn of a new era in Sudanese politics. It provided a roadmap to resolve critical disputes around border demarcation, governance systems, and the benefit sharing from South Sudan's oil reserves. It also enshrined equal rights for men and women<sup>2</sup>, providing for an interim constitution of Southern Sudan, 2005 (and affirmed in the transitional constitution signed in 2011), which under article 16 provide that;

- i). Women shall be accorded full and equal dignity of the person with men.
- ii). Women shall have the right to equal pay for equal work and other related benefits with men.
- iii). Women shall have the right to participate equally with men in public life.
- iv). All levels of government in Southern Sudan shall:
  - a). promote women's participation in public life and their representation in the legislative and executive organs by at least 25 per cent as an affirmative action to redress imbalances created by history, customs, and traditions.
  - b). enact laws to combat harmful customs and traditions which undermine the dignity and status of women; and
  - c). provide maternity and childcare and medical care for pregnant and lactating women.

The constitution also declared that women should have the right to own property and share their deceased husbands' estate with any surviving legal heirs of the dead. In the aftermath, the government established a Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare, and Religious

Affairs. The mandate of the ministry is to mainstream gender throughout government institutions, set up women's empowerment initiatives, and focus on creating national

policies on gender empowerment. In public, political leaders, including the president of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, have reiterated the commitment to empower women.<sup>3</sup>

# PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study is part of the UN Women's efforts to re-energize the women's movement. As such, assessing the situation of women's movement in a select number of countries will enable the UN Women to target its investments more effectively in realizing the objective of strengthening women organizing and other measures to build independent women's solidarity efforts. Therefore, the Study helps identify opportunities for UN Women in South Sudan to leverage existing work and undertake interventions based on practical and more impactful cost-benefit analysis.

The Study was launched to assess factors affecting the performance and operations of the Women's Movement and how the African

experience measures up against current global and national practices on regulatory requirements, good CSO governance, and citizen participation models. It covered information regarding the capacity development requirements of the women's movement, and any internal assessments. It also was to review the relational dynamics, including power dynamics within the women's movement in the select countries and between women's organizations and feminist organizations. Finally, the assessment also examined the enabling environment, accessibility of state and policy structures, and overall coordination and partnership between women's rights organizations, feminist platforms, and the broader civil society working on women's rights.

# METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out using primary and secondary survey methods. Regarding the desk review, it looked at a variety of literature relevant to the subject. Indeed, as a country struggling out of years of conflicts and socio-political instability, there has been some exciting scholarship and reports on the experience of citizens of South Sudan in building the new country after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. Available literature also tackles the women's experience of South Sudan in the diaspora. Complementary data collection utilized the key informant interviews

method in which at least 15 women leaders and workers with women empowerment agencies in South Sudan were interviewed. Key informant interviews were conducted in Juba, Yambio (Gbudue state), and Rumbek (Lake State). Separate Focus Group Discussions in which young (18-35 years) and older (over 35 years) women participated were conducted in the exact locations. Altogether, six FGDs were concluded.

The collected data formed the materials for analysis in this study.

# FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

## The movement

The idea of the movement means different things to different women, seemingly, based on their experiences and interactions. In Rumbek, Lake State, the definition of the women's movement was extensively discussed. To many respondents, the women's movement is an organization, a voluntary group organized as women working to achieve a common goal. In the women's movement, women come together to share ideas and find solutions as women to their problems.

Women saw the movement to contribute towards the good welfare of the community, to teach women about self-reliance, to support them to a better life, etc. They also believed that the movement is to make women less fearful of facing their challenges to promote women's

rights to participate in decision-making. Above all, it is to 'awake' the women to sit together and discuss development ideas that help them, their children, and their families.

Similar constraints and generalities of definitions were typical in the FGDs and key informant interviews held in Yambio, Gbudu state, and Juba, respectively. The women's movement is seen as the platform in which women gather to discuss their problems and seek solutions, whether they are on the road moving with written posters about certain things or presenting their ideas to the authorities from their formal positions in government. Still, movement, as seen in the response below, the flexibility of accommodating women's agenda is what its critical element is;

---

*"It is also a situation where women come together to discuss things that press upon them as women and raise the concern to authorities. It could be in political parties or oppression at the workplace. The movement can also be a spiritual connection among women. They can counsel themselves from various challenges, right from their marriage issues."*

---



# HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

Sudan's first civil war lasted 17 years, killing millions and sending millions to seek refuge in neighboring countries. The South Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM) led the armed struggle with its military wing, the Anya Nya. In 1972, after an extensively mediated peace process led by the World Council of Churches, the Sudan Council of Churches, and the African Council of Churches, the Addis Ababa Agreement was signed between President Nimeiry's Government of Sudan and the SSLM. The agreement gave the South regional autonomy. Nevertheless, the failure of Nimeiry's government to honor critical elements of the Addis Ababa Agreement, including his refusal to hold the Abyei referendum and the imposition of Islamic Law on the whole country in 1983, plunged Sudan into its second civil war, the Anya Nya II.

However, even at this time, the nationwide Sudanese women's movement was kicking in. The Women's Union<sup>4</sup> established a decade earlier, started pushing for changes to personal laws that prejudiced women, especially in marriage and divorce. The efforts led to the man's prohibition from selling his house or land without his wife's permission and the approval for a wife to divorce if her husband is absent and not maintaining her expenses for one year. Women's rights in public life, such as education, work, and equal pay, were complex for society to accept because of tensions between traditionalists and modernists, and little was done to affect the imbalance.

The activism of the Women's Union at the time laid the grounds for expanded gender relations in the future years under the Nimeiry regime. Within the problematic social and patriarchal context imposed by the religious and traditionalist leaders, the Jafeer Nimery regime banned activities of the Women's Union. Still, it established the Sudanese Women's Union (SWU) with structures like the WU. It extended

its activities to the South by establishing the Southern Women's Union, encouraging participation of women in international women's activities, including international women's conferences in Mexico and Copenhagen but under the state's control. Nevertheless, during this period, women earned the right to vote and to be elected in all geographical areas.

The Sudanese Permanent Constitution of 1973 provided equality for women in several areas: no gender distinction in the section dealt with human rights and duties; women were given the right to equal education, to hold public office, and to unionize; and they were granted freedom of association, of speech, and of movement. Labor rights for women included equality in civil service recruitments and promotion based on merit, equality of pay for equal work, equality of pensions, equal rights for training, and equal rights in obtaining annual and education leave. Maternity leave for women was also to be observed.

From as early as 1993, the new rebellion in the South under the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A) aimed at challenging the Arab-Islamic hegemony over the population. During the Anya Nya II, the SPLM demanded that a united Sudan become a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-ethnic democratic state. The brutal war lasted about 22 years. Over 80 percent of the country's population was displaced during this period (Jok Madut Jok, 2007). Eventually, after a lengthy period of negotiations, the government of Sudan and the SPLM signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on 9 January 2005, ending the second civil war. In 2011, most Southern Sudanese (99 per cent) voted to secession from Sudan.

In the Key respondent interviews in Juba, a pioneer women's leader in South Sudan and former governor commented that;

---

*“We entered politics because we were trying to fight for the independence of South Sudan. The men needed our contributions; women were not targeted compared to men during the liberation of the 60s and 70s. The women were united, and men supported the women leaders. Men were seriously supporting the women who showed strong leadership, but today they are planting seeds of hatred and fear amongst women. After the independence, the unity of women is no longer there. Today, the men discourage women from entering politics, planning for women, or selecting women based on their selfish interests.”*

---

The early Women’s associations in Sudan enjoyed affiliation with the different parties.

The women’s organizations allied to political parties with objectives likely to work for the promotion of women’s political rights and the establishment of educational and social institutions, broadly popular campaign issues among women. In 1966, for example, women

from Southern Sudan established the Southern Women’s League headed by Elisabeth Morgan, Alawiya Farag, and Mary Basyoni as part of the Political Alliance of the Southern Front. The organization played influential roles in resettling refugees and those displaced by the civil war. According to one interview recorded by Mawahib (2014).

---

*“Women from the South started their activism in the early 1960s. One group worked with Ananya I. Small girls who were 10 and 12 years old were used to transfer information about the movement of the government army. Those in Khartoum used to collect money for the people in the South. The other group worked with the church, where they learned how to care for their families and religion.*

---

In the years of the active insurgence, the lives of women in South Sudan (and in exile) were characterized by hunger and violence, including large-scale sexual violence, and an increase in disease, including HIV and AIDS (Bubenzer and Stern, ed. 2011). Further, women and children suffered violence through rape, abduction, sexual slavery, and labor exploitation, and such violence even became a tactic used deliberately by the warring tribal factions (Jok Madut Jok (2007: 206).

Women’s involvement in the war significantly impacted traditional gender roles. This development has had the potential to alter the country’s social structure. As men joined the army, women were forced to take full responsibility for their families. They began to hold responsibilities that had previously been in the exclusive domain of the men.

Key informant interviews conducted in South Sudan for this study largely maintained this view. According to a woman economist and a former employee of UN Women interviewed in Juba;

---

*“the women’s movement in South Sudan has been powerful. Even in exile, they mobilized; in Khartoum, they remained active as in the rest of the diaspora. They mobilized themselves and supported the wider course in South Sudan. Throughout this time, there has been strong leadership amongst the South Sudan women. UN Women supported them in consolidating peace. They also worked with micro-movements to link with the grassroots level women”.*

---

Many women contributed to the war effort in official and unofficial support roles as cooks, porters, nurses, translators, and administrators. The women's movement in the post-conflict period has, in part, evolved to push for the recognition of women's active role in the liberation history apart from their rightful place in national reconstruction. Perhaps just as significantly, women contributed on the domestic front - caring for families and communities and taking over the men's traditional roles as they were away fighting in the liberation war. With the peace treaty, 1/4 of seats in the formation of South Sudan's new parliament was reserved for women – in part an achievement many attributed directly to John Garang, the SPLA

leader and first president of South Sudan who publicly advocated for the respect of women's rights.

Although women started their activism as a unified body in Sudan, the challenges to women's empowerment have remained like the barriers experienced by women in South Sudan today. At the time, just like the modern movement, women faced significant opposition from Islamic and traditional leaders who opposed their ideology and activities. The movement survived the different regimes of the Sudan, with many variants of the early formations still prevailing to date.

# OVERVIEW OF THE MOVEMENT

The extent to which women have participated or currently participate politically in Sudanese society reflects the historical differences between the Republic of South Sudan and the Khartoum government since colonial times. The main differences between the regions can primarily be attributed to the unequal penetration of economic development in the two countries, the socio-cultural differences in the areas, and the developments pursued since the CPA.

Poor penetration of economic enterprises and development in the independent state of South Sudan means that the subordinate position of women has been chiefly maintained. The economic and social development pursued by the liberated new Sudan government has not fully recognized the importance of women's participation in the development process, as many historical factors pushed them to marginal economic roles or even educational attainments. Therefore, women's agitation in Sudan

The SPLA's general policy was to keep women combatants away from the front lines of the liberation war but give them auxiliary roles such as providing logistical and administrative support, gathering intelligence, and carrying ammunition and medical supplies to the front lines.<sup>5</sup> In 1984, the SPLA founded an all-female fighting force - a battalion - made up exclusively of women volunteers trained in Ethiopia known as The Kateeba- Banaat, but its existence was relatively short-lived (Judith McCallum and Alfred Okech, 2008). The SPLA prohibited

sexual violence through its code of conduct, the Sudan People's Revolutionary Laws, Punitive Provisions 1983.<sup>6</sup> The punishment for members of the SPLA who committed rape was death by firing squad. Despite the policy, rapes by SPLA soldiers did occur (Human Rights Watch, 1993).

It is also essential to understand that women's position in the post-conflict situation was partly shaped by the Sudanese disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programmes at the war's end. For a long time, the programs discriminated against women as they required that combatant's hand in weapons to be eligible. Since many female combatants did not have weapons, they were prevented from participating in the programmes, and hence the programmes failed to address the needs of women. The programme excluded the women who had played supportive roles in the war (see, Bouta, 2005; De Watteville, 2002; Douglas & Farr, 2004; and Farr, 2002). In other words, the main challenge of women in the reintegration interventions was to convince the actors to provide childcare facilities so that women could get time to take part in other duties, including attending adult classes or being permitted to sit in literacy classes and study with their children.

As such, the growth of the women's movement is closely tied to the evolution of women's participation in the liberation struggle in the country. Many facets of their experience go together. In Rumbek, Lake State, women in a focus group discussion in this study recalled that;

---

***“Women cooked for the army, and they treated the wounded. They mobilized themselves to prepare for the rights and freedoms currently accorded to them by the constitution. This is a long struggle”.***

---

The same experience has reverberated in the following discussion.

---

*“Women fought so much to create peace among the youth fighting within the greater Lake state. Now there is calm, and order, the rampant killing of women and children and continuous fight among the cattle raiders and youth at the cattle camps is contained. At the same time, the women’s movement has contributed a lot to the struggle. Women now need to speak up for their rights, like rankings at the army level, as rewards for women’s role in the struggle or the war of liberation. At the same time, the women mobilized the larger population during the referendum for the independence of South Sudan. These must be recognized”.*

---

The Women’s movement in South Sudan has rich experience pushing for women’s right to vote and participate in governance. The movement has contributed immensely to bringing peace between the SPLA leaders wherever they fell out during the liberation struggle, as sometimes would be the case. They have also fought against gender-based violence, such as raping of women and other sexual exploitation activities.

At the political level, the Women League is the women’s wing in the political party. The leagues are stronger at the state level than at the National level. This is because women’s leadership at the national level is allied chiefly to party leadership, which may shift them into different positions, hence causing leadership gaps that weaken the body. At the state level, however, the administration is more stable, and women in leadership at these levels have been able to support themselves to create a formidable force. Today, more than one hundred women are in parliament, and the women members have organized themselves to move a common agenda in the house.

Writing about the position of women in the South Sudan government, Asha Arabi (2015) has described the situation as ‘being in power without power’. Women in South Sudan naturally became politically active because they had taken multiple family leadership roles during the war. Also, at the level of regional and international agreements, concerns were raised about the role of women in post-conflict countries, leading to solid resolutions that urged governments to ensure deliberate gender inclusion of women in decision-making in such countries.

Women in South Sudan are today part of the political process. The role of women in the peace process has enabled them to talk with authority in tackling issues of conflict and peacebuilding. There is a strong women’s movement in the country, with umbrella organizations to support grassroots groups at the regional level, but nationwide groups are few. The grassroots networks have helped prepare the women for consultations at the national level.

# THE MAIN ACTORS IN THE SOUTH SUDANESE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The work of local-level NGOs, civil society organizations, and governmental gender empowerment bodies has benefited from the shifting international dynamics on women's empowerment. As more international declarations and commitments on women's issues are agreed upon, the awareness of women's issues and recognition of women's human rights in countries like Sudan also increased, giving women more voice and legitimacy. Mawahib Mohamed (2014).

According to the survey's field responses, the women's movement has supported the push for women's election and voting rights. The activities have helped women to communicate their political participation through songs and other general cultural means of communication. Individual women leaders in the Lake State of South Sudan, such as Ager Gum, Awut Deng, Ayen Maguat, Pricilla Nyannyang, Ayen Parek, and Amoor Anyaar, are individual women leaders accredited with contributing significantly to building the movement during the South Sudan liberation struggle. Such encouragement made several women nationwide join the movement and the liberation.

Women's organizations such as the Women's Union in South Sudan (WUSS) were formed in the early 1950s to ensure increased participation of women in decision-making. The group aimed to bring Sudanese women into politics through educational, cultural, and social activities. It is still active, with branches across the southern states (IRBC, 2002). Others, such as the South Sudan Empowerment Network (SSWEN), the Sudanese Advocacy Networks (SAN), the Sudanese Group for Democracy and Elections, the Sudanese Network for Democratic Elections, and the Sudanese

Women's Voice for Peace (SWVP), support the building of a South Sudanese women's movement founded on feminist principles to promote social justice, gender equality, and pluralism. Regarding state agencies, South Sudan's Commission on Human Rights is relevant.

The adoption of UN Resolution 1325, which requires countries emerging from conflict to respect women's rights and to enable their participation in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction, has also motivated multiple international stakeholders to support gender-based activities in the country. International organizations like UN Women have implemented leadership training programs for young Sudanese women's rights activists.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the International Republican Institute (IRI), focused on strengthening the civil society, political parties, and government institutions in the democratic process and activities.<sup>8</sup>

At least twenty UN agencies are present in South Sudan<sup>9</sup> operating under the values of the UN in South Sudan (UNMISS). Their activities support the protection of civilians, promote human (*and women*) rights and assist with the peace process. The organizations include the UNDP, UN Women, UNESCO, the WHO, UNHCR, WFP, IOM, UNICEF, UNFPA, FAO, OCHA, etc. The bilateral donors and partners such as Germany, Sweden, the UK, and the USA have also played important roles here.

The Media in South Sudan has equally been influential in reaching illiterate rural populations through radio, TV, or written media. The media has been important for civic education and the peace process in the country.

# OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

South Sudan finally gained independence in July 2011 but had come at a considerable cost. Between 1983 and 2005, at least two million people died in the Sudanese liberation war and related conflicts. The CPA ended the war in 2005, but the rebellion had led to the loss of lives, displacements of hundreds of thousands of people, destruction of property and infrastructure, and a near-total economic collapse that resulted in the South.<sup>10</sup> Following independence, development priorities in the country have stressed the need to repair the damage of decades of war.

It also means the country is still inundated by reports of continued fighting between the South Sudanese military (SPLA) and rebel groups, threats to civilians, and challenges to

providing emergency aid in some areas. In such situations, women's rights suffer. This point is already discussed above. There is a high level of sexual violence against women in South Sudan, particularly incidences of rape. Women constitute about 40 per cent of the victims, while children victims contribute about 48 per cent.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the provision of 25 per cent female representation at all levels of government under the interim constitution, the quota operates in an atmosphere of entrenched marginalization of women. The situation is sometimes manipulated to the disadvantage of the women. As one of the respondents in the study interviewed in Rumbek remarked;

---

*“Men are still firmly in the positions that women demand, so the women must struggle around them to get anything done. The 25 per cent quota target for women for positions of decision making still only a myth... Due to insecurity, the president says he does not want to allow women to become governors or any other such position because there could be violence.”*

---

Some analysis, however, has shown that women in Sudan were never utterly powerless in the traditional setting. According to Beswick (2000), small numbers of South Sudanese women traditionally held religious, political, and clan leadership positions in their country. Long before the colonial era, women from the Shilluk and Nuer kingdoms, for example, held positions as religious leaders. Similarly, Azande and Bari women held positions as clan leaders. The writer argued that the Dinka communities even appointed women to replace male chiefs during the Turco-Egyptian and Mahdist colonial period (1821–1898) to resist the colonialists' barbaric policy of executing tax-defaulting chiefs, believing that colonial administrators would be less likely to kill women.

However, despite these historical precedents, the traditional South Sudanese culture does not encourage women to assume leadership positions. It tends to discourage women from involving themselves in anything that might undermine their abilities to care for their male

relatives or children. However, during Sudan's two civil wars, with men constantly away on the frontlines or killed in battle, women had little option but to assume many of the responsibilities that men had previously held. In this way, the wars were a catalyst for many South Sudanese women to begin to break with their customary gender roles.

There is a serious gendered gap in the social development indices of South Sudan. In terms of education, traditionally held beliefs and practices still presume that women are better off to be married at an early age than kept in school. This has kept low educational qualifications for many South Sudanese women. Many educational institutions were destroyed during the war, denying generations of men and women access to education. According to the National Baseline Household Survey released in June 2012, only 28 percent of women in South Sudan ages 15 to 24 are literate, and only 16 percent of females older than 15 are literate.<sup>12</sup> Women's lack of education excludes

them from processes perceived as complex and technical and hence from understanding vital national policies and programmes. With high illiteracy rates, the perception has not improved much.

Women also lack access to the financial resources required to pay political party nomination fees or mount effective election campaigns. Patriarchal practices continue to hinder women's progress in politics, and faced with negative attitudes, intimidation, and stereotyping, women in national leadership positions in South Sudan are still a minority.

Levels of socio-economic achievements are low, making another urgent subject for women's lobby in South Sudan. The women leaders have, for instance, been very vocal against female genital mutilation (FGM), widely

practiced in the country because of apparent Islamic-Arab endorsements. The government of South Sudan is yet to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Many women's lobbying action has now focused on pressuring the government to do this.

The findings of the study show that many women are worried about the future of their political lobby and the realization of their rights. Concern was expressed about declining support for women's issues in South Sudan. The challenges of conflicts, insecurity, and poverty have not helped either. There is a widespread feeling that women are being disrespected, and more work is required to increase women's voices and representation from the grass-root level. As one of the participants in a Focus Group Discussion in Yambio observed;

---

*“Women in the past were free from guns and war that instigated other abuses or took away women's life, but today, women are subjected to many forms of heinous violence due to war and the rampant availability of guns among people. In this way, we feel we are not as united as before; women at the national level represent us, but there is a disconnection between us.”*

---

South Sudan has a long road ahead of it in terms of empowering women. The country has many social, economic, and political realities to resolve for conducive conditions to emerge. The operating environment in which the country's women's movement works influences how the institutions operate. In the following pages, this is briefly analyzed.

Women leaders concentrate on women's participation in peace and humanitarian activities, the depiction of women's issues in the media, and the work and role of elected women leaders in the country's parliament and political parties. These are the primary constituencies addressed in the work of the women's movement besides the general target of the women of South Sudan, both at home and in the diaspora.



# WAYS OF OPERATING/METHODS OF WORK

According to Tønnessen and Kjølsvædt (2010), women activists in South Sudan in the first five years after the peace accord were quite vocal and allowed a critical space in using some of the formal methodologies to reach decision-makers and broadcast concerns. Local and international civil society actors focusing on women's rights have used various methods, including workshops and lectures, to reach relevant audiences for support. They also empower women through training and participation in appropriate program situa-

tions, leading advocacy with authorities on target issues.

These activities require a lot of resources, and the lack of sufficient resources can sometimes limit progress.

The historical challenges to women's unity in South Sudan and the country's high poverty rate still pose a growing problem for women's organizations. A women's respondent in Juba observed that

---

***“Because of conflicts, access is difficult and available resources are too scarce or inadequate. Ethnicity has divided the people, and there is more resistance to women's empowerment and the issue of divisive leadership.”***

---

According to Mama Agnes, the first woman governor in South Sudan, the women's movement should have cause to worry because

fewer men today support women's cause than in previous years. In her observation;

---

***“Nowadays... there is now more of party politics, there is no unity among women, they are opposing each other, no common agenda. The problem is that women are afraid to speak out and afraid of men. Sometimes men listen to women when in danger, but most times they don't.”***

---

Finally, there have also been international institutions and NGOs that offer skills coaching and courses in practical skills such as leadership skills, lobbying, and advocacy to increase opportunities for women in political decision-

making. The NGOs supportive of the women's movement in South Sudan, such as UN Women, the International Republican Institute, and UNDP, have also supported research activities and capacity-building activities for women.

# EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPACT

Indeed, the women's movement in South Sudan is concerned with advancing human rights, particularly women's rights. Introducing a quota for women's participation in governance structures is a significant step in the right direction, and women are putting considerable pressure on the government to observe it. South Sudan has produced many strong women leaders, such as former minister Rebecca Garang. Elizabeth Deu Aguin, former MP for Bor in Jonglei State. Rebecca Lou, the pioneer director of Gender in the South Sudan government, etc. However, the small number of female leaders at national and state levels

suggests that new layers of women leaders are required to step into the positions opened to them by the movement.

In Yambio, Gbudue state, participants in a Focus Group Discussion reflected on the positive outcomes of the women's movement in South Sudan over the years. The discussions noted that the work of the women's movement has led to empowerment and improved lives for women through the years. It has created economic opportunities for women through entrepreneurship and empowered them to speak up and discuss their rights.

---

*“It has helped women to achieve a lot. They can celebrate their day like International Women's Day and empower women taking care of their children by sending them to school. Women are no longer dependent on men; they now care for themselves by self-reliance. They have advanced their rights and financial status; they have given voice to women to speak up and raise the peace among communities and between government and other army groups. It has encouraged girls to go to school and helped in adult education.”*

---

Further, it has encouraged women to walk side by side regardless of their educational

background or social differentiations. In the opinion of one of the participants;

---

*“Girl child education and adult education are critical. I have an Arabic background, but because of the women's movement, I manage to attend an English course with my sisters. The women walk together.”*

---

The introduction of the 25 per cent quota for women in government was seen as a significant intervention by the government to improve women's lives. Nevertheless, even though the women's percentage in national and state legislative assemblies is allocated, the elected women are not necessarily empowered to effect the envisioned changes. Besides, the country faces a severe shortage of resources, and only a few women have had the political experience or the formal education to get a good grip on the roles of political leadership and what is required of them. These have been amongst the primary areas of interventions by the women's movement. Also, implementing the quota at the more localized county and village levels remains particularly challenging, as patriarchal customary law still takes precedence.

A current lack of funding and resources for women's initiatives threaten the empowerment advocacy networks that have been established.<sup>13</sup> The campaign for women's inclusion in governance ought to step up, confronting the hindrances that impede women's participation in public leadership. Otherwise, they remain 'guests in the table of power' as their circumstances have sometimes been described. Many respondents fear the movement may not bring much without concerted efforts on women's empowerment. As one respondent exclaimed during the survey, women overwhelmingly participated in signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Still, after the new nation was created, 'most of the promises made to them have not been implemented'.

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement paved the way for a new democratic transition in South Sudan, although the challenges of nation-building have been numerous. The women's movement in the country remains reflective of its historical epoch. The women's networks in the country must be energized to amplify their voices and ensure the government guarantees women's rights. Women leaders across the country should also work together.

In line with its historical commitment to gender empowerment, as well as the country's international obligations, South Sudan's government needs strong cooperation and support from international actors to build its rule of law, justice, equality, and gender equity mandates. It must work with the country's women to tackle the deeply entrenched challenges that face women's advancement in South Sudan. Systematic measures are needed to create opportunities for women, combined with a governance system that safeguards their rights to transform the country's social and political relationships to lift women's lives. The following recommendations are pertinent to expand the women's movement's strides;

- i). Harmonize the customary laws with the constitutional requirements under the Bill

of Rights. For example, local and traditional leaders need to be aware of women's rights guaranteed by the constitution to ensure positive changes in societal norms.

- ii). Through broadcast media and personal outreach, a national outreach campaign is necessary to inform citizens of their rights and duties.
- iii). Public awareness forums are necessary to change the negative social attitudes, influenced by customs and traditions, towards women's participation in public life.
- iv). Lobby and advocate to engender a national budget to prioritize introductory service provisions in education, health care, infrastructure, and clean water over military spending.
- v). Improve gender equity in school enrolment, encourage girls' education.
- vi). Eliminate sexual violence against women, girls, and boys; and establish holistic psychosocial services for survivors of violence, taking action to hold perpetrators accountable.
- vii). Promote gender-sensitization training across the country.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Asha Arabi (2014) 'In power without power': Women in politics and leadership positions in South Sudan

Ballington, J., ed. 2004. *The implementation of quotas: African experiences*. Quota Report Series. Stockholm: International IDEA.

Beswick, S. 2000. Women, War and Leadership in South Sudan (1700–1994). In J. Spaulding & S. Beswick, eds. *White Nile, black blood: War, leadership, and ethnicity from Khartoum to Kampala*. Asmara and London: Red Sea Press

Chege, M. 1987. "Conflict in the Horn of Africa" in E. Hansen ed. *Africa: Perspectives*

Civilian Groups *Afr. j. polit. Sci.* (2002), Vol 7 No. 2, *African Association of Political Science*

Deng, F.M. 2010. *New Sudan in the making?* New York and Eritrea: Red Sea Press.

El-Bakri ZB; Kameir EM Aspects of women's political participation in Sudan,

Friederike Bubenzer and Orly Stern 2011 Hope, Pain & Patience-The Lives of Women in South Sudan, The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, International Social Science Journal. 1983; 35(4):605-23.

Mawahib Mohamed (2014) The Women's Movement in Sudan: From Nationalism to Transnationalism: Prospects for a Solidarity Movement, Ph.D. Thesis submitted to the York University, Ontario, Canada,

McCallum, J. & Okech, A. 2008. Small arms and light-weapons control and community security in Southern Sudan: The links between gender identity and disarmament. In: Africa Peace Forum, *Regional security, gender identity, and CPA implementation in Sudan*. Ontario: Pandora. <<http://www.ploughshares.ca/libraries/Build/Nairobi07RegSecGender.pdf>>.

*on Peace and Development*. London: Zed Books

Samson S. Wasara 2002 *Conflict and State Security in the Horn of Africa*, Militarization of

Sharon E. Hutchinson, A Curse from God? Religious and political dimensions of the post-1991 rise of ethnic violence in South Sudan, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Volume 39, Issue 2, June 2001, pp. 307-331

Tønnessen, L., & Granås Kjølseth, H. (2010). *The Politics of Women's Representation in Sudan: Debating Women's Rights in Islam from the Elites to the Grassroots*. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute. Retrieved from: <http://www.cmi.no/publications/file/3643-the-politics-of-womens-representation-in-sudan.pdf>

Nate Haken & Patricia Taft (2013) *The Dark Side of State Building: South Sudan, Failed States Index 2013*

Evie Browne (2013) *Democracy strengthening in Sudan*, Helpdesk Research Report

Applied Knowledge services.

Sørensen, B. 1998. *Women and post-conflict reconstruction issues and sources*. Geneva: UNRISD.SSCCSE (South Sudan Commission for Census, Statistics and Evaluation). 2010. *Key Indicators for Southern Sudan*. Juba

## Internet Sources

<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/5/women-of-south-sudan-set-strategic-agenda-for-a-gender-responsive-peace-agreement>

<https://www.ndi.org/sudan-south-sudan-womens-advocacy>

<https://www.paxforpeace.nl/our-work/programmes/women-as-leaders-political-participants-in-south-sudan>

<https://paanluelwel.com/2018/03/08/press-for-progress-celebrations-of-the-international-womens-day/>

<http://cepo-southsudan.org/content/womens-empowerment>

# ENDNOTES

1. See <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category-south-sudan.html>
2. By 2006, South Sudan had two women cabinet ministers, four Chairpersons of Parliamentary Committees and two female presidential advisors. The chairpersons for the Human Rights Commission and the Anti-Corruption Commission were also women. See <http://www.c-r.org/accord/sudan/guests-table-role-women-peace-processes>
3. At a UNDP conference on women in politics held in 2007, he indicated his support for efforts aimed at enhancing the capacity of women and enabling them to make a more meaningful contribution to national development (UNDP, 2007). By 2010, the state quota on women's appointments had almost been achieved in Southern Sudan's national ministries with 7 of the 32 ministers being women. At the state level, however, by 2010, only one of Southern Sudan's ten states was governed by a woman.
4. The organization started as an urban movement and came about through the efforts of educated women from the middle and the upper classes in the Khartoum Sudan. Despite this fact, it pioneered women's rights in the Sudan, calling for a unified women 's movement across the country, regardless of women 's differences, to create a strong women 's front that could lead channel women 's struggle. The Women 's Union largely succeeded in building initial awareness among different women 's groups in the country of their rights.
5. Even with that - SPLA prevented women from taking part in frontline combat – they did not mean they were excluded from climbing the ranks. Victoria Adhar Arop's outstanding contribution to the SPLA's war effort saw her promoted to the rank of brigadier by the end of the war.
6. Beswick, S. 2000. Women, War and Leadership in South Sudan (1700–1994)
7. <http://sswen.org/movement-building/>
8. See IRI: South Sudan Program Summary, [www.iri.org](http://www.iri.org).
9. <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/srsg-s-statement-celebration-un-day-24-october-2016>
10. <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/south-sudan-what-will-independence-mean-women>
11. Amnesty International, report on Human Rights Situation in South Sudan, 2013
12. [http://ssnbs.org/storage/NBHS Final Website.pdf](http://ssnbs.org/storage/NBHS%20Final%20Website.pdf)
13. <https://enoughproject.org/blog/girls-not-guns-promise-progress-south-sudan>



---

East and Southern Africa Regional Office  
UN Gigiri Complex, UN Avenue;  
Block M, Ground Floor  
P.O. Box 30218- 00100 Nairobi, Kenya  
Tel: +254 20 762 4778

[africa.unwomen.org](http://africa.unwomen.org)  
Email: [esaro.publications@unwomen.org](mailto:esaro.publications@unwomen.org)

 [unwomenafrica](https://www.facebook.com/unwomenafrica)

 [unwomenafric](https://twitter.com/unwomenafric)

 [unwomen](https://www.youtube.com/unwomen)

 [unwomenafrica](https://www.linkedin.com/company/unwomenafrica)