



## Women and Armed Violence in South Sudan

### Introduction

Despite the official conclusion of the second Sudanese civil war, conflict has persisted across large parts of South Sudan, some of it fuelled from outside the country's ill-defined borders. Local armed conflicts, exacerbated by an abundance of small arms, continue to cost lives and disrupt communities. Men are almost exclusively the perpetrators of the violence, but women, as well as children and the elderly, make up many—and in some cases, the majority—of the victims.

This report examines the experiences and roles of women in armed violence; primarily as victims but also as instigators and peacemakers. It begins with the pre-war period, before firearms were common, when women were exempt from armed conflict, serving instead as sources of refuge or conduits for peace through marriage. As war shattered many traditional norms, the roles of women were transformed with the introduction of firearms and the militarization of conflict. At first, women became victims only as “collateral damage” but gradually they were seen as legitimate targets, both for sexual and other types of violence.

Based on fieldwork in South Sudan, the report describes the evolving roles of women in South Sudan's conflicts since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed. It shows that targeting women is no longer just a side effect of “inter-tribal fighting” but, in some cases, has become a deliberate tactic designed to destroy communities. It also examines how women can act as perpetrators of violence—as conflict instigators as well as peace builders. The report focuses on the main pastoralist tribes and traditions, and inter-tribal conflict in Jonglei, the area of heaviest violence in 2012. This focus should not obscure the fact that communal conflict impacts the lives of women throughout the country.

### Historical role of women in armed conflict

Cattle raiding as well as inter- and intra-tribal fighting have been features of South Sudanese life for decades. But the scale, intensity, and impact of violence have increased in recent years. Anthropologists Hutchinson and Jok noted that in pre-war South Sudan (pre-1955) community violence consisted of infrequent and short-lived skirmishes over resources such as grazing areas or fishing pools (Hutchinson and Jok, 2002). The weapons used were almost exclusively spears. Women and children were not regarded as legitimate targets. One reason for this was that a woman's ethnicity was not as rigidly defined as it is today. In earlier times, women were permitted to marry men from other tribes and to adopt that tribal identity, without becoming a “tribal enemy”. In fact, women who married into other tribes represented ‘points through which adversarial relations among men could be potentially defused and transformed into relations of affinity through marriage’ (Hutchinson and Jok, 2002). The unwritten ethical code further considered women as sources of refuge for fleeing or wounded men.

During the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005), small arms and light weapons flooded into the south. Firearms became integral to the culture, and were used as a form of dowry payment in some parts of the south. To kill with a spear, one has to be physically close and have a specific target. Firearms depersonalized the act of killing or injuring another person, and contributed to the dehumanization of the other. This made it easier, psychologically as well as physically, for combatants to target women and children.

Over the course of the civil war, norms changed concerning who was a legitimate target. Some analysts have said that women accounted for up to seven per cent of the Sudan People's



Liberation Army's (SPLA) official force (Weber, 2011), though this is probably a high estimate. In any event, female SPLA members were rarely on the front lines, working almost exclusively as cooks, carriers, and nurses. A high profile example of the targeting of women and children came in 1991 when the pro-Khartoum breakaway SPLA-Nasir killed up to 2,000 civilians in Bor and displaced some 200,000 more (Amnesty International, 1995). The scale and brutality of this attack, which included rape and mutilation of women, set a new precedent for intra-South Sudanese fighting and brutality.

### **Sexual violence as a weapon of war**

While there is no data on the prevalence of sexual violence during the Sudanese civil war, anecdotal evidence suggests that it was widespread. In a series of focus groups organized by the Small Arms Survey in Juba, Bor, Nasir, and Rumbek in June 2010, few women were willing to talk of their own experiences, but almost all spoke of “a friend” or “a woman I know” who was raped by soldiers. The vast majority of these accounts related to abuses perpetrated by northern forces—both Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and proxy groups that included both northerners and southerners. Similar abuses were carried out by SPLA troops, but South Sudanese women appear to be reluctant to speak of them; overt criticism of the SPLA remains a taboo.

The lack of discipline within the SPLA in the early years of the war meant that marauding soldiers, operating as individuals or in small groups, often viciously attacked women. One former aid worker who worked in South Sudan throughout the war described an incident that took place in 1986:

*A group of women, friends of my wife, were walking from Wau to Juba when they were captured by SPLA soldiers. They were tied to a tree and abused for days; raped and used like a toilet. My wife visited one of them afterwards in hospital. She could barely speak. She was gone in her mind. The SPLA were like animals then, totally out of control.*

The SPLA leadership began a reform process in 1991 and attempted to curb sexual violence. The army developed an internal code of conduct that stipulated the death penalty for any soldier found guilty of rape. There are numerous first-hand accounts of this penalty being carried out. However, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) continued to report instances of rape carried out by SPLA soldiers, both individual cases and as part of a broad, retaliatory policy against communities.

Both organizations also provide numerous accounts of SAF and other northern-supported armed groups carrying out systematic rapes of women throughout the war in an effort to terrorize and displace populations. The abduction of women and children from Northern Bahr al Ghazal was also commonplace. Rizeigat and Missiriya militias, supported by the Khartoum government, abducted thousands of Dinka women and children (Amnesty, 2005). The abductees were then sold into forced labour in the north.

### **Women as refugees**

Sexual violence was both a cause of displacement and a symptom of large-scale population movements. In the early 1990s, at the height of South Sudan's forced migration, there were an estimated 745,000 southern Sudanese refugees (UNHCR, 1994). While this number dropped significantly over the rest of the decade, the Sudanese population in northern Kenya's Kakuma camp peaked with 66,000 refugees in 2005.

Sexual violence suffered by women refugees in bordering states generally had different triggers and ‘enabling factors’ than those in wartime Sudan. Other challenges compounded



the vulnerability of refugee women in an unfamiliar environment. Many were without husbands or male family members; cramped quarters sometimes forced young men to sleep with extended family or in neighbours' tents; women often had to travel farther and longer in search of firewood or water due to overpopulation, or in search of casual labour (Purdin and Ondeko, 2004).

Other factors differentiated female victimization in refugee camps. Whereas sexual violence inside southern Sudan was often driven by ethnic or political motivations, in the camps it was largely a result of traditional cultural notions of early and forced marriage. Sudanese patriarchal norms followed women into camps despite their 'single' status, and they were often forced to adhere to practices set by male elders at home. In addition to early or forced marriage, some women were abducted from the camps and forcibly 'remarried' back in southern Sudan if a higher dowry could be obtained. Women and girls in Kakuma camp who attempted to leave abusive marriages were routinely held in the Sudanese-administrated camp prisons. As a result of their well-founded fears, some women resorted to familiar wartime survival mechanisms such as taking new 'husbands' to protect themselves in the camps.

### **Violence in the interim period**

After the 2005 CPA, collective violence temporarily eased in South Sudan. There was a sense of optimism and shared purpose in the South, while a common enemy in Khartoum appeared to unite disparate Southern factions. But the sense of unity was short lived, as inter-tribal conflicts moved beyond routine, low-level cattle raiding into new and more brutal forms.

By 2009 the cycles of attacks and retaliation reached unprecedented levels. Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) reported an increase in attacks on villages, rather than cattle camps, and a rise in the number of women and children injured or killed. During 2009 alone, MSF recorded eight separate attacks targeting women and children, resulting in the deaths of more than 1,200 people. (Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2009)

One of these attacks took place in the village of Torkej in Upper Nile state on the south bank of the Sobat River on 8 May 2009. The Lou Nuer attackers later said they came to take revenge for a cattle raid, tracking their stolen cattle to Torkej. The Jikany Nuer, the targets of the attack, said the assault was just the latest retaliation in a spiral of violence that had started almost a decade earlier.

At around 3 a.m., the attackers surrounded the village on three sides, leaving the river as the only exit. They then began systematically massacring the inhabitants. One woman who was injured in the attack said:

*I was sleeping outside with my three-year-old son under my mosquito net and woke when I heard the shooting. I saw them walking around the village, lifting people's mosquito nets and shooting. I took my boy and ran inside the tukul (hut) but they followed us inside and shot everyone. I covered the boy but my mother and two of my children are dead.*

The assault lasted three hours. Seventy-one people were killed and another 57 shot and injured. The vast majority were women and children. When asked why women and children made up so many victims, one woman explained:

*Some of the men escaped into the river, but I can't swim. Most of us can't swim. Anyway, how could we run and carry our children at the same time? We could only pretend that we were dead and hope that they would go away eventually.*



Other witnesses said most of the men were out tending their cattle. In either case, the close range of the violence indicates the attackers knew, and were not deterred by, the age or gender of their victims. Several of the women who were assaulted described how the attackers “laughed and sang songs” as they carried out the massacre.

### **Post-independence violence**

While the immediate run-up to the independence referendum in January 2011 saw a reprieve in inter-tribal conflict, it resumed almost immediately after the voting. At the same time, rebel militia intensified their challenges to the hegemony of the SPLA and the central government.

The inter-tribal violence in 2011–12 has been most widespread and intense in Jonglei, South Sudan’s largest state. The roots of the conflicts there lie in the rivalry between the Murle tribe of eastern Jonglei and the Lou Nuer of northern Jonglei, with the occasional involvement of the Bor Dinka and other Nuer clans. During the second half of 2011, a series of attacks blamed on the Murle took place in Lou Nuer and Dinka territory throughout Jonglei, including Akobo, Uror, Duk, Nyirol, and Twic East counties, resulting in the deaths of up to 1,000 people and the alleged theft of thousands of cows. Dozens of women and children were kidnapped in the raids.

By early December, the Lou Nuer ‘White Army’ (loosely organized cattle camp youth) began gathering in Akobo county to organize a revenge attack. On 23 December, up to 8,000 of them attacked the Murle village of Likuangole in Pibor county. Pibor town itself was attacked on 31 December. Estimates of the number of people killed range from the low hundreds to 3,000 people. Witness accounts indicate that women and children made up the majority of the victims—two thirds, according to the Pibor Commissioner’s office.

One aid worker with an agency that has a presence in Pibor said the killing of women went “beyond stray bullets and collateral damage.” He said clinics and hospitals were also deliberately attacked and destroyed. “There’s an attempt to destroy everything, including all the facilities that provide public services, everything that provides life.” As the victims fled into the bush, they were exposed to new threats, with one clinic in Pibor reporting a “huge increase” in malaria and malnutrition.

Until recently, sexual violence had not been a defining feature of the ethnic violence in South Sudan. This may be changing. After the attack on Pibor, HRW quoted one observer who had seen “three dead women who appeared to have been raped with blunt objects” (Peace Women, 2012). Recent violence has clearly taken a more vicious turn. In a clinic in Nasir, Upper Nile state, where many of the Lou Nuer victims of the Murle assaults were treated, one aid worker said a woman had had her belly sliced open and her unborn child removed.

There are also reports of a potential new trend; the targeting of women to the exclusion of all other goals. One high profile Murle representative, interviewed by Small Arms Survey, said some young Murle men had indicated in recent discussions that they were *only* interested in finding and killing Lou Nuer women. She said:

*The last time they came back from a raid they didn’t even bring cattle. They say they’re only after the Lou women. They say, “This time is for killing only. Just to revenge our women.” There is the feeling that we have to kill the women so that the Lou feel pain.*

Recent attacks, in which cattle were stolen and children kidnapped, indicate that the sentiment expressed above is not shared by all Murle involved in the violence. However, it is one of the many signs that gender can define women as targets.



### **Opposite extremes: Women as instigators and peacemakers**

Women are not just passive victims in the conflicts of post-war South Sudan. They can also encourage and perpetuate the violence, or alternatively act as catalysts for peace.

Community women often reinforce expectations that men should provide for their families and fulfil a masculine stereotype that includes the role of cattle raider. In February 2012, for example, an international researcher in Uror county witnessed the return of Lou Nuer fighters who had taken part in the raid on Pibor a few weeks earlier. The researcher saw “a man who was parading through the streets with the cattle that he had brought back from the raid and a woman went out to join him and celebrate the cattle.” Another witness in Lankien said:

*After the raid on Pibor, when the men returned to Lankien, the women and children were celebrating and praising the men. It's strange, they didn't seem to think of the repercussions.*

The story can be very different elsewhere. In a focus group arranged by a conflict mitigation researcher in February 2012 in the Lou Nuer town of Waat, one woman said:

*Young women might support the young men in the raids or see the cattle raiders as strong, but they think in a very shallow way and don't know what they are really supporting.*

This group of women blamed much of the inter-tribal violence on food insecurity. They said women put pressure on their husbands to bring home food and this could encourage the men to raid other tribes. This leads to a vicious cycle in which communities stop cultivating in rural areas because it leaves them vulnerable to attack, thereby perpetuating food insecurity and reliance on raiding.

In many cases women are complicit in the violence simply because they do not speak out against it. In one of the hospitals treating recent Lou Nuer victims, an aid worker recounted how women victims were treated alongside men from their own community who carried out attacks on the Murle. Instead of being angry with the men, she said many of the women appeared to be resigned to the violence:

*I genuinely believe that they're exhausted by it. It's so destructive. The men are not only putting themselves at risk but others, too, and there is little the women can say.*

Not all South Sudanese women feel powerless; on rare occasions women have acted as peacemakers. There are stories, dating from the 1980s, of Kachipo and Murle women successfully halting violence by refusing to have sex with their husbands until the men of the two tribes stopped fighting. Julia Aker Duany, a Lou Nuer peace activist and current undersecretary to the ministry for parliamentary affairs, says that in 1994 women in Upper Nile state resolved a conflict over fishing and grazing rights by exerting pressure on the male relatives in their own homes. In one instance, a woman refused to milk the cow her husband had stolen.

Julia Aker Duany now works with fellow female activists from the Murle and other Jonglei tribes to find ways of turning women into agents for peace. She and her fellow Juba-based activists want to bring together the women from different Jonglei tribes to share their experiences, develop mutual understanding, and bring pressure to bear on the men in their communities to stop the violence. She says:



*Women in South Sudan don't know their influence; they don't know how to use their power. But they have a lot of power. Women have to galvanize and change the common direction.*

The task is not easy. Although there is strong support for the initiative among the women of Jonglei, even the journey to a neutral meeting ground exposes them to the risk of attack. Yet many think that finding and establishing such neutral ground is their only chance of survival.

### **Conclusion**

The roles of women have evolved throughout the decades of conflict in South Sudan. While they were once considered inviolable, the advent of war and the introduction of small arms eroded norms of protection. In the CPA's interim period, women came to be seen as legitimate targets in protracted cycles of tribal attacks and retaliation. Today, there are signs that women are viewed as legitimate—even preferred—targets. While many act as conscious or unwitting provocateurs to inter-tribal violence, others act as peace advocates. Yet for the majority of South Sudanese women, their primary roles in times of conflict are those of family protector, victim, and survivor.

If social norms on the protection of women and children can change for the worse, they can also improve. Women themselves can act as powerful catalysts. Groups of articulate and educated women in Juba are striving to find solutions to the communal conflicts that plague South Sudan, but meaningful action can only come from women in rural areas. With assistance, these women could capitalize on their strengths—in numbers and in solidarity as women—for positive, peaceful change. In the past, South Sudanese women were able to serve as peacemakers by transcending ethnic identity when they married into another tribe, thereby joining two communities together. Today, they have the potential to serve as more than mere symbols by becoming active as brokers of peace.

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