

# DISPLACED GIRLHOOD: GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF COPING AND SOCIAL CHANGE AMONG CONFLICT- AFFECTED SOUTH SUDANESE YOUTH

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## **Abstract**

*As wartime inhabitants, female children have often been presented as paradigmatic non-agents, victims of a toxic mixture of violent circumstances and oppressive cultural practices. Child- and gender-sensitive approaches, on the other hand, have embraced a more balanced recognition of displaced girls' active, if often constrained, efforts to cope with adverse circumstances. In South Sudan, a young country mired in unresolved conflict and forced displacement, girls must navigate multiple and complex challenges. Drawing on fieldwork conducted among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda and returnees in South Sudan, I examine ways in which gender shapes local realities of conflict, displacement, return, and reintegration, focusing on the often-overlooked experiences of girls and female youth. Study findings evidence displaced girls' remarkable determination and resourcefulness as they struggle to overcome a persistently turbulent climate of social instability, deprivation, and conflict.*

## **Résumé**

*En temps de guerre, les filles sont souvent présentées comme non-agents paradigmatiques, victimes d'un mélange toxique de circonstances violentes et de pratiques culturelles oppressives. D'autre part, des approches adaptées au genre et à l'enfant font place à une reconnaissance plus équilibrée des efforts énergiques, quoique souvent limités, déployés*

*par les filles déplacées pour surmonter des circonstances défavorables. Au Sud-Soudan, un jeune pays aux prises avec des conflits non résolus et des déplacements forcés, les filles doivent affronter de multiples et complexes défis. S'appuyant sur des recherches sur le terrain menées auprès de réfugiés sud-soudanais en Ouganda et de rapatriés au Sud-Soudan, l'auteur examine comment le genre façonne les réalités locales du conflit, du déplacement, du retour et de la réintégration en se concentrant sur les expériences souvent négligées des filles et des jeunes femmes. Les résultats de l'étude montrent la détermination et l'originalité remarquables des filles déplacées qui luttent pour surmonter un environnement toujours turbulent d'instabilité sociale, de privation et de conflit.*

## **Introduction**

As wartime inhabitants, female children are often presented as paradigmatic non-agents, victims of a toxic mixture of violent circumstances and oppressive cultural practices. Highlighting their vulnerability over all other characteristics, the perspectives espoused by most aid agencies have also tended to relegate girls to the status of members of groups with “special needs.” Proximity to violent situations and breakdown of social structures may indeed increase the exposure of displaced children (primarily girls, but also boys) to sexual abuse and other forms of exploitation. In addition, it is widely recognized that discrimination in the provision of assistance during humanitarian emergencies

and situations of protracted displacement often disproportionately affects women and girls.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, attention has also been focused on the coexistence of both agency and vulnerability, and the interplay of distress and resiliency in the face of adversity. This approach offers a more balanced perspective than the uncritical exclusive focus on vulnerability and victimhood so characteristic of traditional constructions of displaced and war-affected girls, and other children in similarly challenging circumstances. While it is still far from being the norm, scholars and child-rights advocates have progressively embraced a more positive recognition of the positive roles that young people in general, and girls in particular, can play as social actors, not just passive recipients of others' provisions.<sup>2</sup> The oft-cited Machel report, *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, for instance, proclaims that "adolescents have special needs and special strengths,"<sup>3</sup> and urges us to consider that "young people should be seen in that light; as survivors and active participants in creating solutions, not just as victims or problems."<sup>4</sup>

Research findings demonstrate that, in South Sudan, members of the youngest generations are being differently affected, vis-à-vis their adult counterparts by the processes shaping the socio-political landscape of their newly independent society. The position occupied by most South Sudanese girls, in particular, is not an easy one, given not only the renewed conflict and adverse humanitarian conditions, but also the pronounced gender inequalities that characterize their ethnically diverse but consistently patriarchal society.<sup>5</sup> Confronting deeply engrained cultural and social norms dictating a subordinate and mostly silent role for young females, however, may place girls in a difficult and even dangerous position. As other studies of conflict-affected female youth have also noted, "Resilience in the context of war often carries a high price."<sup>6</sup>

In South Sudan, changing attitudes towards gender roles are particularly salient among the thousands of returning refugee girls for whom reintegration into a society they do not necessarily identify as "home" is fraught with difficulties. Many returnee girls display self-assurance and express progressive views on social issues—i.e., marriage, women's participation in public life—that may be categorized as transgressive and even perceived as a deliberate affront to South Sudanese tradition. Domestic discord as well as serious incidents of physical violence and police arrests were mentioned in field interviews. It can be concluded that, for these girls, displacement entails more than a conflict-induced geographical relocation, but also encompasses a socio-cultural dislocation—displaced girlhood—that persists in the post-independence period. Efforts to address the renewed instability and human insecurity currently

shaping South Sudan must thus incorporate attention to the needs and aspirations of *displaced girls*, guided by a deeper understanding of the implications of *displaced girlhood* for South Sudanese society as a whole.

Drawing on fieldwork conducted primarily among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda and returnees in South Sudan, this article presents findings of a larger study of young people's role in post-conflict reconstruction and peace- and nation-building in Africa. More specifically, I examine the multiple ways in which gender shapes local realities of conflict, survival, displacement, return, and reintegration, focusing on the experiences of girls and female youth. I begin my discussion by outlining the conceptual and methodological frameworks that guided the research on which this article is based. Next I present a brief overview of the wartime and current humanitarian conditions in South Sudan, which provide a necessary background in which to situate the experiences of South Sudanese girls. I then discuss the main findings of my study, structured around the three key dimensions of displaced girlhood in their young country: (1) domestic relations and marriage practices, (2) education, and (3) livelihood and economic opportunities. I conclude my analysis by summarizing the main findings of my research on South Sudanese girls' efforts to overcome a legacy of war and displacement, and re-emphasizing the significance of adopting an age- and gender-sensitive approach to humanitarian programming.

### **Conceptual and Methodological Frameworks**

Although male-centred approaches remain the norm, attention to the gender-differentiated experiences of refugee women has increased over the last fifteen years.<sup>7</sup> Displaced children have similarly become the focus of a growing body of scholarly work from a variety of perspectives and disciplines.<sup>8</sup> Most of this focus on uprooted youngsters has been directed to the global south, which hosts roughly 85 per cent of the world's youth population.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, "the limited corpus of reliable research on Africa's youngest citizens has tended to adopt a negative outlook."<sup>10</sup>

While gender stereotyping is rather common, with female youth identified as "troubled" and males characterized as "troublesome,"<sup>11</sup> fewer studies have addressed the gendered nature of childhood.<sup>12</sup> The (de)gendered assumptions underlying prevalent constructions of childhood and youth as they intersect with notions of protection, deservedness, acceptable survival choices, and changing social roles during humanitarian crises and displacement also remain largely unexamined. This general inattention to gender issues among war-affected and displaced children has been attributed to the prejudicial attitudes prevalent in international development and humanitarian arenas,

which privilege the perspectives and agendas of boys. As Nordstrom argues, “The lack of political, economic and educational development for girls is a symptom of many societies’ failure ... to see women as political, economic or educated actors.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, “Girls continue to be marginalized in programs for child soldiers at both national and community levels,”<sup>14</sup> despite the pervasive use of female children and youth in fighting forces across the world.

Recognizing wartime displacement as deeply gendered and generational, this article examines the experiences of South Sudanese girls in the unresolved conflict and humanitarian crises that continue to affect their country in the post-independence period. My study is inspired by the new paradigm of childhood studies articulated most explicitly by Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout,<sup>15</sup> and the gender-sensitive and feminist analyses of wartime displacement and post-conflict reconstruction that have become more prevalent in the last few decades.<sup>16</sup> The new paradigm of childhood studies emerged from an effort to refocus “current understandings of the experiences of children by demonstrating that childhood is socially, politically, economically, and culturally constructed.”<sup>17</sup> My choice to privilege a gendered/feminist anthropological perspective stems from my recognition that, since “the experiences of women displaced by South Sudan’s wars were different from those of men,”<sup>18</sup> their activities, views, and perspectives must be recovered from their usual invisibility. Feminist standpoints have also contributed a salutary alternative to functionalist explanations of female subordination and other forms of social inequality, rejecting the tautological premise that power hierarchies are justified by their role in preserving social cohesion.<sup>19</sup> The combination of these two approaches, I argue, offers a useful lens to analyze the challenges and opportunities facing South Sudanese girls in their efforts to overcome a legacy of war and displacement, coupled with patriarchal and gerontocratic attitudes often resulting in young females’ exclusion and marginalization.

I draw on data obtained through field-based interviews and focus group conversations conducted in Juba, Yei, Magwi, and Nimule (South Sudan), and Kampala and Adjumani (Uganda) in June to August 2011, August 2012, and December to January 2012–13, combined with a review of the literature and official documents. Approximately 25 open-ended interviews were conducted at each location—and 50 in Juba—with some participants being interviewed more than once. Given that the terms *child* and *youth* are not defined within fixed chronological parameters in either South Sudan or northern Uganda, I relied on self-identification to determine participants’ age group.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, I interviewed representatives from UN agencies, international and national non-governmental organizations

(NGOs), community-based organizations, donors, national, state and local government officials in both Uganda and South Sudan.

Views expressed during spontaneous conversations in both South Sudan and Uganda were also been incorporated into the discussion as relevant. I examined the ways in which conflict-induced displacement is affecting power relations along gender and generational lines. Conversations explored South Sudanese girls’ hopes and priorities, and the specific challenges and opportunities they themselves identify as shaping their experiences of conflict, displacement, and reintegration. Analysis was grounded in the identification of the recurring topics and themes that emerged from the data. Initial findings were discussed with study participants, who were invited to revisit and/or elaborate on their earlier responses. The final identification of domestic relations and marriage practices, education and livelihood, and economic opportunities as the three most salient dimensions of displaced girls’ experiences resulted.

### **Background: The Context of Displacement**

The Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005) triggered one of the worst humanitarian disasters of the twentieth century. Lasting more than two decades, Africa’s longest-running civil war in recent history reportedly resulted in over two million casualties, most of them civilians, including women and children. Over five million people were internally displaced, and an estimated 500,000 sought refuge in neighbouring countries.<sup>21</sup> Repeated displacement was common, as people sought to cope with highly volatile wartime conditions by moving to different places before eventually returning “home” in South Sudan. Given the very young demographic composition of the South Sudanese population,<sup>22</sup> a high proportion of those displaced by the war were children.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed on 9 January 2005 between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) brought an end to the Second Sudanese War. The CPA paved the way for the secession of what is now South Sudan from the Khartoum-based Northern Government. In accordance with the terms of this peace accord, the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) conducted a referendum on self-determination in January 2011, which resulted in an overwhelming turnout, almost universally voting in favour of secession.<sup>23</sup> The Republic of South Sudan became an independent nation on 9 July 2011.

The official ceasefire and subsequent independence facilitated the return of large numbers of displaced individuals, which took place both spontaneously and under the aegis of the UNHCR and the International Organization

for Migration. According to IOM estimates, 2.5 million South Sudanese had returned by 2012, settling across all 10 states that make up the Republic of South Sudan. This is the equivalent of approximately 23 per cent of the country's total estimated population. This massive influx of returnees severely tested the country's absorption capacity and host communities' ability to share limited basic services, livelihood opportunities, and economic resources.<sup>24</sup> In addition, South Sudan received large influxes of nationals from neighbouring African countries, including Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Sudan who seek business, trade, and other sources of livelihood in the rapidly expanding if rather chaotic South Sudanese economy.<sup>25</sup>

The world's newest sovereign nation continues to face numerous challenges. Even before the recent resurgence of conflict, decades of civil war and the absence of structural investment had resulted in major gaps in infrastructure and service delivery across the country. There were significant livelihood challenges for local communities and returnees alike in basic services and infrastructure, food security and potable water, and protection. The fragile humanitarian situation was exacerbated by the implementation of austerity policies that, as has been widely documented in both developed and developing countries around the world, have a more severe impact on women and girls.<sup>26</sup> Severe austerity measures were imposed in South Sudan when government expenditures dramatically declined in 2012, and have yet to be restored to earlier levels. This controversial decision was triggered by the loss of oil revenue resulting from the suspension of the country's oil production earlier that same year. Disagreements over transit fees and other disputes with Sudan were cited as the main issues provoking this drastic measure.

On 15 December 2013, gunfire erupted again in the South Sudanese capital of Juba. Within hours, violence spread within and beyond the city, following what some have categorized as an attempted coup. What started as a political confrontation between power contenders within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) soon escalated, giving way to a deadly pattern of revenge and counter-revenge attacks along Dinka-Nuer ethnic lines. At the time of writing in early February 2014, the violence continues unabated and is threatening to become a full-blown civil war, should the peace dialogue led by Inter-governmental Group on Development (IGAD) fail to produce a prompt and satisfactory resolution to the conflict.<sup>27</sup> Also as of February 2014, an estimated 707,400 people have been displaced inside South Sudan, while 149,700 people have fled to nearby countries including Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Sudan.<sup>28</sup> This article, which draws on field data collected between the summer of 2011 and early 2013, does not include the views of girls

affected by this recent outbreak of violence. Nevertheless, preliminary information made available by some aid agencies working in the region report an unsurprising worsening of humanitarian conditions, and an intensification of the gendered socio-cultural trends observed in the post-independence, pre-current conflict period discussed in this study.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Displaced Girlhood in South Sudan***

Few groups faced greater risks and dislocation during the Sudanese civil war than the country's children. Girls were even more adversely affected as a result of patriarchal attitudes that conferred females of all ages lower status in society, legitimized gender and sexual-based violence, and undervalued young women's contribution to the war effort. As Nordstrom observes, girls in conflict-affected areas across the world "are actors in the drama and tragedy of war along with adults."<sup>30</sup> Regardless of age, females are typically ascribed lower status in South Sudanese society than boys and men. Females in South Sudan carry the burden of a heavy workload, early marriages, and bride prices, while gender roles and negative stereotypes contribute to the unequal distribution of resources. South Sudanese anthropologist Jok Madut Jok draws attention to gender differentials, adding, "The war in Sudan has affected women in more and different ways than men, but beyond the usual ways in which such state-sponsored violence affects women and children—through rape, abduction, sexual slavery, and labor exploitation."<sup>31</sup> At the same time, women's and girls' involvement in wartime survival activities—as combatants, army support personnel, or female heads-of-household—necessitated a considerable rethinking of traditional gender roles.

For the large numbers of girls who, alone or with their families, sought refuge within or across their country's borders, displacement brought about its own set of unique challenges and opportunities. Their experiences were quite diverse, depending, among other factors, on their migratory trajectories and exilic life conditions. Gender factors greatly influenced the options available to them, resulting, for instance, in unaccompanied minors' unequal access to foster families (which favoured girls) and resettlement opportunities (which targeted mainly boys). As discussed in the background section, South Sudanese refugees and IDPs had been returning home in steady numbers since the signing of the CPA. For many among the youngest generations, the terms *home*, *return*, and *reintegration* should be regarded as misnomers, as the move to their new county for them involved settling in the land of their elders for the first time and adopting lifestyles that seldom met their expectations.<sup>32</sup> Some returnee girls would have preferred to remain

in the diaspora, at least until conditions improve in South Sudan. Others longed for resettlement in a Western country, a possibility made more remote after the CPA, but perhaps again conceivable for the growing numbers of new refugees produced by the current conflict

Younger children struggled with a much more restricted diet and more limited access to health care than was available while their families were based in internationally managed camps and settlement abroad or in Khartoum. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the needs of baby boys tended to be privileged over those of baby girls during resource-constrained times, although this is rarely openly discussed. Older girls and women lamented the loss of the greater opportunities available to them in exile. This was particularly the case for those girls who are members of the approximately 75 per cent of recent returnee families that had settled in rural areas. Unlike older generations, many returnee girls are completely urbanized and unaccustomed to rural environments and lifestyles. Some youth—more often boys but also girls if suitable arrangements are available—chose to go back to Kenya and Uganda to finish their education, believing their opportunities remained greater there. Many girls reported feeling more displaced and alienated in South Sudan than they did abroad. Long years in exile, which often comprised much or all of their childhoods, had instilled in them social values—including views on gender—that often differed from those of their South Sudan-born elders. Better-educated and more self-assured than their local counterparts, returnee girls' progressive views on social issues are often at odds with traditionally patriarchal mores.<sup>33</sup>

In spite of adverse circumstances and multiple challenges, most returnee girls demonstrate remarkable determination to overcome a persistently turbulent climate of social instability, deprivation, and conflict. Their experiences of displacement, return, and reintegration—and, in some cases, additional displacement—are triggering profound gendered and generational changes, both for themselves and for those who stayed behind. Domestic relations and marriage practices, education, and livelihood and economic opportunities are among the areas of girls' social arena undergoing more pronounced transformations in South Sudan.

#### *Domestic Relations and Marriage Practices*

Domestic relations in South Sudan are embedded in hierarchically structured polygynous households where a woman generally occupies a subordinate position to her husband and to her older co-wives. Although girls of marriageable age are regarded as valuable assets—as sources of both unpaid labour and potential income from dowry payment<sup>34</sup>—their autonomy and decision-making power are

severely restricted during this stage of their lives. “I wanted to stay in school. I liked to learn,” commented a 15-year-old wife in Nimule, Eastern Equatoria, “but my father said that we could not pay the fee, and that I had to marry instead. Girls' dowries are used so that their brothers can be married. My husband already had two wives and many children. Now I have a son too. There will be more soon.” Traditionally, only with age and increasing numbers of born and surviving children does the social status of married women improve within their households and communities. Those in female-headed households may find themselves simultaneously enjoying more autonomy and struggling with a more constrained access to necessary resources.

In South Sudan, two out of five households are headed by females,<sup>35</sup> partly because large numbers of women were widowed during the war. More recently, many others have become single parents and heads of households as the result of either abandonment or spousal death resulting from escalating armed clashes and inter-tribal conflict. For these women, some of them barely out of childhood themselves, supporting their children and other dependents involves fulfilling roles that had previously been in the exclusive domain of their fathers, husbands, or brothers. Those who grew up in exile were exposed to other cultures and views on females' position in society that often contrasted with the more constraining traditional social mores of conservative South Sudan. A combination of wartime imperatives and displacement has thus had a transformative effect on gender dynamics and domestic relations, often altering the ways in which girls see their roles as daughters and sisters, and subsequently as wives and mothers.

Women often welcomed these changes more than their husbands and male relatives did, and at times that caused friction in marriages and their family relationships. The shifts also caused stress for parents and children, with parents more entrenched in traditional ideas, struggling with the ideas, values, and lifestyles that their children were exposed to at school.<sup>36</sup>

Research data indicate that domestic violence and rape are common and particularly prevalent in areas that received the highest numbers of returnees. Females admitted feeling insecure within their households and in public spaces. Nevertheless, while violence against women and girls was perceived as a significant community threat, over a third of women respondents claimed that they would never report cases of violence perpetrated against them or their children to formal institutions such as traditional courts or the police.<sup>37</sup> Additional research is needed to elucidate the structural factors and local attitudes that continue to constrain women's and girls' access to justice in South Sudan.

Related to domestic and gender-based violence in the post-independence environment is the trend among some families to marry off their daughters at an increasingly young age. This has been explained as a survival strategy to obtain cattle<sup>38</sup>—vital among pastoralist groups—money, and other assets via the traditional practice of transferring wealth through the payment of dowries, in the absence of other viable alternatives. Studies of child marriage in societies across the world indicate that this widespread practice “has a significant negative impact on women and girl’s realization of key human rights, including their rights to health and education, physical integrity and the right to marry only when they are able and willing to give their free consent.”<sup>39</sup> As is the norm in most other cases, child marriage in South Sudan takes places in a context of pronounced gender disparities and high poverty levels. Additionally, South Sudanese mothers suffer from the highest maternal mortality rate in the world, estimated at 2,054 deaths per 100,000 live births.<sup>40</sup>

It is worth noting that, in some South Sudanese communities, child marriage is considered to be in the best interests of both girls—some of whom are as young as 12 when they are married—and their families. Marrying girls off as soon as arrangements can be made is justified as a way to protect girls from premarital sex and out-of-wedlock pregnancies, which would decrease girls’ dowry price and marriage prospects, and constitute an affront to the family’s honour.<sup>41</sup> In traditional South Sudanese society, a girl whose behaviour is seen as dishonouring her family is categorized as particularly transgressive. Some girls are severely beaten and subjected to other forms of violence; threats of being cursed and even killed may also be employed to coerce rebellious girls to act according to the wishes of her family—typically meaning her male elders and often her brothers who hope to use their sisters’ dowry payments to obtain wives for themselves.

Child marriage appears to be more common among pastoralists than among farmers less reliant for their survival on cattle obtained through dowry payment. It was also less frequently reported by returning refugees and other displaced groups than by those who stayed behind. Returnee girls, as well as local girls from better-off families, often expressed a desire to delay marriage, and the arrival of their first baby, at least until they were able to complete their education. Parents who were better educated themselves tended to support such preferences. However, this may change if deteriorating circumstances force resource-constrained families to resort to marrying off their daughters. The precarious position occupied by very young wives in South Sudan warrants focused attention, especially in light of the worsening humanitarian situation. Failure to address the

often devastating and long-lasting consequences of child marriage is likely to have serious implications for the future development of South Sudan.

### *Education*

“In this day and age, an uneducated society is a doomed society,” proclaimed South Sudan’s President Salva Kiir at his 22 May 2011 inaugural address. Although some notable improvements had been made since the CPA, education and skills-building opportunities remain grossly inadequate across the South. In spite of the fact that four times more children were enrolled in primary school in 2011 than in 2005,<sup>42</sup> there remained about 1.3 million children of primary school age without access to education even before the current resurgence of conflict. The quality of the instruction received by those in school is also cause for concern, as South Sudan suffers from an acute deficit of trained educators. Over 40 per cent of the teachers have completed only primary education, and 45 per cent have achieved a maximum of secondary education. Moreover, 10 per cent of the teachers working in South Sudan have received no formal education or vocational training.<sup>43</sup>

As a result, literacy levels in South Sudan remain among the lowest in the world, and only 27 per cent of males and 19 per cent of females aged 15 and over report being able to read.<sup>44</sup> The country also suffers from the lowest ratio of female-to-male school enrolment in the world. As in other spheres of social life, gender inequalities result in girls’ far lower access to educational opportunities. Factors including child marriage and the dearth of prenatal and postnatal health-care services result in girls having a much greater probability of dying during pregnancy or childbirth (one in nine) than of completing primary school (one in one hundred).<sup>45</sup>

Multiple and interrelated factors cause girls’ enrolment and retention rates to remain very low. Girls are traditionally responsible for household chores and the care of younger siblings. Parents often favour sons when school fees and other costs preclude them from sending all their children to school. Most girls find it difficult to continue school after marriage or becoming pregnant. In addition to facing the responsibilities and challenges of housekeeping and child care, they have to contend with the social stigma associated with schoolgirls who are also mothers. As reflected in conversations with school-aged girls in Yei, Central Equatoria, “If a girl comes back to school after having a child, other students—boys and girls, but especially boys—bully her and call her ‘mama.’ Young mothers are embarrassed and often do not return to school because of it.” Others explained that their husbands would not allow them to continue school after marriage, alleging that they

would be considered unfaithful if they insisted on going to school, as has also been documented in other studies.<sup>46</sup> This situation is contributing to the high rates of female illiteracy, limiting females' venues to access alternative training, and restricting opportunities for social and economic development.<sup>47</sup>

A recent IOM study also found severe gender disparities in female-to-male teacher ratios, with only 5 per cent of females teaching at schools in some states.<sup>48</sup> In a context where few female teachers exist to serve as mentors and role models, parents express concern about sending girls to schools that are dominated by boys and male teachers, worried that their daughters may be exposed to the risks of premarital sex and pregnancy, which would diminish their value as brides. In other cases, however, families are more inclined to send their daughters to school now than in the past, in the hope that, as educated brides, they will fetch larger dowries. These changing attitudes have been used to explain the current rise in enrolment of Dinka girls in rural areas, which, it is argued, have "less to do with an adoption of Western notions of gender equity, and more to do with pastoral economics."<sup>49</sup>

Also noteworthy is the significant link between displacement and education. Lack of educational opportunities was often reported as a primary reason for returnees' secondary displacement. Many of them chose to resettle in urban locations, where they expected to benefit from better access to formal education and vocational training. Returnee girls, in particular, often expressed positive views about the importance of education and what they perceived as the relatively liberating features of urban life. Some, especially those with higher education levels and good English skills, hoped to be able to find employment with international organizations or foreign companies. Access to financial resources and the possibility of autonomous livelihoods, while at times leading to considerable family discord, can also increase girls' sense of empowerment and self-esteem, and have a transformative effect on the gendered division of labour.

#### *Livelihood and Economic Opportunities*

Employment is another sphere in which gender dynamics are identified as playing an important role in girls' experiences of displacement, return, and reintegration. Those who grew up in urban areas abroad often display a negative attitude towards rural environments. Many were exposed to functioning cash economies in Kenya, Uganda, or Khartoum and arrived in South Sudan with skills for which they do not always find a market. The South Sudanese urban economy expanded in the CPA period, although not fast enough to keep pace with the rapidly increasing numbers of job-seekers. Nevertheless, some "elite" girls secured

high-status, well-paid jobs with the government or with UN agencies, international donors, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Most returnee girls, as well as their local counterparts, however, lacked the necessary qualifications to engage in such high-status, well-paid jobs. The main sources of employment available to them in urban areas included cleaning and cooking at restaurants and hotels, carrying water on construction sites, and engaging in various forms of petty trade and small business.

Cultural expectations constrain the choice of jobs considered acceptable for girls. This is also the case for boys, although to a lesser extent, since it is primarily females whose virtue embodies their family's honour. Occupations that involve interacting with non-kin males—i.e., waitressing in restaurants and bars, especially at night—are considered disreputable and tend to be avoided by local girls, either on their own accord or as per their family's instructions. Nevertheless, exceptions of local girls engaging in this type of employment could be found, such as those from very poor families, and in the case of young women heads of household.<sup>50</sup> This pattern was illustrated by a 19-year-old female who, originally, from Nimule in Eastern Equatoria, spent most of the war years in Uganda, eventually moving to Juba after the CPA. As she remarked, "In our society, when you work in the hotels people think you're not decent; it is not respectable. But you can make a lot of money, and you can survive and feed your family. Besides, many of us don't have other options; because we were outside of the community we do not have the necessary connections."

An income-generating activity primarily associated with returnee women and girls, particularly those whose wartime displacement led them to Khartoum, is brewing and selling beer. Many displaced South Sudanese reportedly resorted to drinking as a way to cope with the frustrations of life in an IDP camp in the North, in spite of the fact that consuming alcohol is illegal in Sudan. Brewing and selling beer was one of the few income-generating opportunities available to IDP women and girls in Sudan. Many re-established their beer-brewing businesses upon return to South Sudan, where economic options are also limited and there are no restrictions on alcohol.<sup>51</sup>

Displaced girls appear to have a more flexible outlook on job acceptability. This attitude was perhaps born out of survival, as difficult conditions while in exile might have forced them to engage in undesirable but available livelihood strategies to which they have become accustomed; alternatively—or perhaps simultaneously—it could signal additional efforts to rebel against constraining traditional social mores.<sup>52</sup>

Gainful employment is a path to upward mobility for many girls, local or displaced. Some are even willing to

court social disapproval to obtain a measure of economic and social independence. On the other hand, job allocation often reflects ethnic affiliation and generally relies on kin networks, placing girls whose families do not condone their choice of employment at a clear disadvantage. Some of these activities are harmful and/or illegal—i.e., petty crime, drug peddling, prostitution—although commonly practised, and fraught with potentially dire implications for the girls who engage in them.

Although none of the girls in my research engaged—or admitted to engage—in commercial sex, other recent studies confirm that large numbers of young women and girls are trading sexual services for money or protection in the absence of other means of survival.<sup>53</sup> Given that prostitution is illegal in South Sudan, sex workers are extremely vulnerable to abuse, both by their customers and by the police who reportedly harass and even rape them with impunity. Child prostitution takes place in almost every brothel in Juba, some of which have separate lodges for the youngest girls. Markets are another site where very young children, mostly girls but also some boys, engage in survival sex. Street girls, some as young as six years of age, routinely perform sexual acts in exchange for money, food, or other basic goods.<sup>54</sup>

These young girls can be said to have been “forcibly displaced” to the margins of society. The abuse to which they are subjected daily is one of the most heart-wrenching realities of life in post-independence South Sudan. Some aid workers believe that at least some of them may be unaccompanied or separated minors who “fell through the cracks” of the system and found themselves with no source of economic or social support. Others may have been abandoned by abusive or destitute relatives unable to provide for them. Regardless of the path that led them to their present circumstances, the current humanitarian situation does not bode well for young sex workers in South Sudan. On a more positive note, the fact that increasing attention is being focused on the particular challenges these girls face is an important first step to better understand their plight and find ways to assist them to reclaim their lives.

### ***Looking Ahead: Conclusions and Recommendations***

Dramatic changes brought about by war, renewed conflict, and displacement are having a profound effect on the traditional ideas and practices surrounding girlhood in South Sudan, and thereby influence the actual lives of young females. The progress made since the signing of the peace agreement is being threatened by the renewed violence that has engulfed all 10 South Sudanese states, provoking new waves of internal and cross-border population flows. As

the previous discussion has illustrated, conflict-related displacement often entails dramatic gendered and generational changes, both for those forced to flee their hometowns and those who stay behind. Compelled by necessity to dispense with gender expectations, many displaced girls are increasingly venturing into non-traditional livelihoods, some of which are abusive and harmful. Many others, educated abroad, have introduced much-needed new skills and progressive attitudes to a country where both economic and social development were effectively halted for decades. Even if often constrained, the lifestyle choices made by these girls and young women serve to contest, reconfigure, and sometimes reinforce gender identities and unequal power relations within their households and communities. In turn, these dynamics are affecting the way in which access to material assets, education, employment opportunities, and other key resources is negotiated among and within displaced and local groups.

The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement followed by independence created potentially positive opportunities to address gender inequalities. The Government of South Sudan publicly endorsed gender equality and the promotion of children and women’s rights in all spheres of life, often under pressure from donors and development agencies. Promising child- and women-friendly initiatives are already evident, at least at the policy level. Provisions in the Transitional Constitution, which entered into force at South Sudan’s independence in 2011, guarantee women and girls the right to consent to marriage. Similarly, current Penal Code provisions criminalize “kidnapping or abducting a woman to compel her to get married.”

Another relevant piece of legislation is the 2008 Child Act. Overall, the Child Act seeks to protect and extend the rights of children in South Sudan in accordance with the provisions of Article 21 of the Interim Constitution of South Sudan and human rights instruments such as the Convention of the Right of the Child and the African Charter on the Right and Welfare of the Child. A rather comprehensive document, the Child Act guarantees girls and boys under 18 the right to non-discrimination, health, education, life, survival, development, to express their opinion, and protection from torture, degrading treatment, and abuse. Also promising for displaced girls and those confronting adverse circumstances is the fact that “empowering vulnerable groups and providing safeguards for people living in extreme poverty” was among the GoSS’s stated priorities, as reflected in the South Sudan Development Plan intended to guide the “core policies on social protection ... [that] are being developed.”<sup>55</sup> The impact that the current resurgence of violence might have on these developments cannot be predicted with any certainty, but concerns that

progress made on these issues might once again be overshadowed by conflict-related imperatives seem justified.

To have a real impact, normative measures must be followed with immediate and long-term steps to protect all girls from child marriage, domestic abuse, lack of access to education, poverty, and exploitative activities such as prostitution. While resource constraints constitute a major concern, some reforms can be made without a large investment and could thus be implemented in the short term, especially if the high levels of international and local political will evident until recently can be maintained. If empowered to benefit from the right opportunities, displaced girls, who by the force of circumstance have learned to be resourceful, can make a positive contribution to their new country's return to the path towards peace and prosperity. "In turn, empowering women [and girls] will enable South Sudan to strengthen its economic and political structures and institutions."<sup>56</sup> These incipient developments held the promise of more gender-equitable reconciliation and nation-building processes in the new nation, a process made even more critical by recent events.

#### NOTES

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5. It is important to recognize that South Sudan is a highly heterogeneous society, with ethnicity playing an important role in shaping gender and other power relations within the country. Although ethnic differences can be found in the ways in which these gender relations are manifested, female subordination remains a constant across South Sudanese society.
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13. Carolyn Nordstrom, "Girls and War Zones: Troubling Questions," in *Engendering Forced Migration: Theory and Practice*, ed. Doreen Indra (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 44–5.
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17. Ensor and Goździak, *Children and Migration*, 19–20.
18. Orly Stern, "'I was once lost': South Sudanese Women in the Diaspora," in *Hope, Pain and Patience: The Lives of Women in South Sudan*, ed. Friederike Bubenzer and Orly Stern (Sunnyside, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2011), 216.
19. Alison M. Jagger and Paula Struhl Rothenberg, *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations between Women and Men* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978).
20. Although I did encounter some exceptions—mainly among girls whose families had lived in exile for a significant length of time—South Sudanese females are considered "youth" only before marriage, which often takes

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  31. Jok Madut Jok, *Sudan: Race, Religion, and Violence* (London: Oneworld, 2007), 206.
  32. Ensor, “Migrant Youth’s Role.”
  33. Marisa O. Ensor, “Youth Culture, Refugee (Re)integration, and Diasporic Identities in South Sudan,” in special issue, “Late Modernity and Agency: Youth Cultures in Africa,” *Postcolonial Text*, forthcoming.
  34. While the anthropological term for this practice would be *bride price* or *bride wealth*, South Sudanese people commonly refer to it as *dowry*. Cattle, and sometimes land, remain the preferred forms of dowry payment.
  35. Human Rights Watch, “*This old man can feed us, you will marry him*”: *Child and Forced Marriage in South Sudan* (HRW, 2013), [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/southSudan0313\\_forinsertWebVersion\\_0.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/southSudan0313_forinsertWebVersion_0.pdf).
  36. Stern, “I was once lost,” 230.
  37. International Organization for Migration, *Village Assessment Survey Report*, iv.
  38. While the practice of paying dowries with large numbers of cattle is particularly prevalent among pastoralist groups, dowries payment is a common expectation of marriage exchanges across South Sudan.
  39. Human Rights Watch, “*This old man can feed us*,” 4.
  40. Ibid.
  41. Ibid.
  42. United Nations Children’s Fund, *Children in South Sudan Fact Sheet* (Juba: UNICEF, 2011), <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Children%20in%20Sudan%20summary%20sheet%20final.pdf>.
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