

CHALLENGING NORMS: MARGINALISED WOMEN AND INFORMAL PEACEBUILDING IN SOUTH SUDAN

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This article is a critical reflection on how women continue to be excluded from decision-making in peace processes in the Horn of Africa by exploring South Sudan as a case study. The global marginalisation of women is evident at the continental level in Africa, regionally in the Horn of Africa, and nationally in conflict-affected countries. Patriarchal culture, high levels of gender inequality, and sexual and gender-based violence in the long history of violent conflict make South Sudan a strong case study for demonstrating the marginalisation of women in peacebuilding and mediation processes in the Horn of Africa.¹ Despite being disproportionately affected by conflict, women are largely sidelined from participation in formal peace processes and structures.

The negotiation and implementation of the Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in 2018, along with the legal and policy frameworks related to peacebuilding and gender equality in the country, suggest that women's inclusion is merely tokenism. South Sudan therefore falls short of the aspirations of the global Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, as outlined in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000.² Yet, to enhance women's visibility as stakeholders in society and partners in peace and security, South Sudanese women conduct informal peacebuilding through women-led grassroots networks and activism efforts in a bottom-up approach to contribute to durable peace.³

WOMEN'S AGENCY IN THE CONFLICT IN SOUTH SUDAN

The portrayal of women as victims of conflict is a dominant theme in academic literature and policy publications, including the texts of UN security council resolutions.⁴ South Sudanese women have played active roles, however, in the long history of secessionist conflicts in the country (1955–1972; 1983–2005) and in its post-independence sub-national conflicts.⁵ Understanding the gender dynamics in South Sudanese conflict paints a more accurate picture of women's role as both conflict and peace actors, along with their changing role in society.

At the national level, women's role during armed hostilities includes joining rebel fighting forces as combatants, singing cultural songs to encourage men to join the fighting forces, and publicly shaming those who evaded participating in the conflict. At the community level, women sing songs to incite men into cattle raids and revenge killings in inter-ethnic clashes and celebrate the return of men from successful raids.⁶ Over the course of conflicts in South Sudan, women and children comprise the majority of conflict-displaced persons. Women have moved away from conflict areas as men have been recruited to fight or were killed. At the societal level, this has triggered a transformation of gender roles, with women assuming the status of heads of households. Approximately 58% of households in South Sudan are now headed by women.

Understanding these gender dynamics

and roles that emerge in the context of South Sudan's conflicts reveal women play crucial roles; therefore, the exclusion of women from conflict resolution and peace processes leaves out an essential demographic. It dismisses the perspectives, experiences, and voices of women as important actors in both conflict and the resolution of conflict. This further impacts the peace process and its outcomes as it leaves out the interests and perspectives of a large and important social group, ultimately affecting both the quality of peace agreements and the durability of peace.⁷ The inclusion and participation of women in peace processes is an asset to society:

When women's voices are heard and heeded, critical priorities that would otherwise be left out of peace processes are often reflected [in peace agreements] ... Their voices need to be heard, their perspectives seen, and their solutions legitimized; they must become leaders ... with the power to shape policies and agendas.⁸

THE CULTURE OF EXCLUSION

Conceptually, the inclusion of women in formal peace processes is predicated on three grounds. First, women are entitled to inclusion as a right.⁹ This establishes inclusion as an equaliser and follows a rights-justice based approach. Second, women's inclusion lays the foundations for social and political transformation. The argument is that by including women in peace processes, it broadens the scope for inclusion and participation of other marginalised actors, such as

civil society, subsequently making peace processes more inclusive, progressive, and durable.¹⁰ Third, inclusion highlights the value women bring to formal peace negotiations and peacebuilding, arguing that their participation leads to both the improved quality of peace agreements and more durable and lasting peace outcomes in conflict-affected societies.¹¹

The WPS agenda promotes the inclusion of women at all levels of decision-making in peace and security globally. WPS represents a transformation of patriarchal culture and traditional gender norms in conflict-prone societies, such as South Sudan. It aims to transform norms that perpetuate unequal representations and positions of men and women in matters of peace and security. These norms have long constituted the disempowerment of women, leading to their exclusion from peace and security processes and undermining the recognition of their significant contributions to the durability and effectiveness of peace agreements.¹²

Women's exclusion from formal peace processes in South Sudan

To understand the exclusion of women in South Sudanese peace processes, it is important to consider the ratio and type of representation they receive. The dismal representation of women at the negotiating tables, in observation delegations, and in technical peace implementation commissions in South Sudanese peace processes demonstrates that women are not considered to be key drivers or legitimate stakeholders

in peace processes. Women are also not adequately consulted by negotiators. Hence, their experiences and perspectives of conflict and peace are deliberately overlooked, thus preventing their meaningful contributions to shaping the peace agenda.

It should be noted that between the negotiations for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 and the R-ARCSS negotiations in 2017–2018, there has been a notable growth in the representation of women in formal peace processes. Initially representing 2% of the mediators, 8% of the negotiating team, and 5% of the witnesses and signatories of the CPA,¹³ by 2015 and the ARCSS (Agreement for Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan) negotiations, women's representation had grown to encompass 33% of the negotiators and 9% of the witnesses. This once again marginally increased in 2018 during the R-ARCSS process, with women representing 35% of negotiators and 17% of witnesses. While there is a significant increase in women's participation in peace processes over time, they nonetheless remain a minority and are often only included in tokenistic processes.

Women in South Sudan have also been underrepresented in the technical implementation structures of the R-ARCSS peace agreement, further revealing the tokenistic representation of women vis-à-vis their male counterparts. In the initial ARCSS (2016) agreement, women were assigned 25% of the executive, 3% of the Joint Monitoring and

Evaluation Commission (JMEC), 5% of the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) board, and 4.7% of the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism, all of which play instrumental roles in the reconstruction of South Sudanese peace.¹⁴ The National Constitutional Amendment Committee had no women representation in its eight-member committee. In 2018, the R-ARCSS increased women's representation in both the JMEC and SDSR to 20%, and appointed a woman, Angeline Teny, as the chair of the SDSR¹⁵; she was also notably appointed as the defence minister in 2020. In March 2023, President Salva Kiir relieved Ms Teny of her duties in this role, further diminishing women's representation and decision-making power in the formal peace structures.¹⁶

Encouragingly, as it stands, women occupy 28.5% of the national assembly (legislature) positions, which is above the constitutional threshold of 25%, but estimates are that women were more than 50% of the voters in the 2010 election and 52% of the referendum voters in 2011.¹⁷ Out of the 64 political parties (only 14 of these officially registered) in the country, only three are led by women (4.7%) and only two of these are officially registered, totalling 14% of registered parties and 3% of all parties in South Sudan. Additionally, among the 100 members of the Council of States (state-level legislature), only 26 are women.

The composition of formal negotiation teams and peace implementation structures in South Sudan reveals

significant levels of marginalisation of women from formal peace processes in the country. Women have demonstrably been denied the space and opportunity to contribute towards the formal peace processes, while men dominate all levels of formal decision-making and formal peace processes, structures and inevitably, outcomes. Women's marginalisation is also reflected in state and national-level political structures.

THE TURNING POINT: WAGING PEACE ABOVE THE GLASS CEILING

In the face of their exclusion from formal peace processes and political structures in South Sudan, women continue to push for greater inclusion and participation in post-conflict peacebuilding. This is manifested most notably in the strategic shift of their skills, resources, capabilities, and networks into informal peacebuilding at the community and grassroots levels. This pivot to informal peacebuilding by women is neither a novel nor distinctive occurrence in the realm of peace and security. A study examining 63 formal peace negotiations and agreements globally establishes that civil society movements play parallel and informal roles in 60% of the peace agreements (38 out of 63).¹⁸ Of this 60% that benefit from informal peace processes, 71% involve women and women's groups driving the informal processes and peacebuilding.

Women in South Sudan have thus identified the viability of informal peacebuilding and social movements as a way to share their voice and have a

critical impact on lasting peace. Women are filling the gaps caused by exclusion in formal peace processes through informal activism.¹⁹ It is in this context of the search for an alternative outlet for women to contribute to peace²⁰ that formidable women-led organisations have emerged and created space for peacebuilding, for example, through community dialogues and reconciliation forums, advocacy, and the provision of health and psycho-social services to survivors of conflict and violence. Some of these organisations include: the Sudanese Women's Union, the New Sudan Women Federation, the Sudanese Women's Empowerment for Peace, Sudan Women's Voice for Peace, the Women's Action Group, and the South Sudan Women Empowerment Network. These women-led grassroots organisations in South Sudan have established local peace committees and built inter-ethnic coalitions with tribal elders to promote post-conflict healing for their respective ethnic communities.²¹ The actions of these women have positively transformed inter-tribal attitudes and tempered political rhetoric.

Women-led organisations have also mobilised national coalitions for mass action against sexual violence and to push national political and peace actors to implement gender-responsive aspects of the peace agreements, public policy, and national laws. For example, in 2014, South Sudanese women's coalitions organised protests to pressure the government to ratify the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which occurred in 2015.²² In 2017, a coalition

of women from multiple tribes and religions held what they called “A Silent March” to protest sexual violence, which was rampant after the collapse of the ARCSS and urged warring parties to embrace peace and protect women’s rights and dignity.²³ These bottom-up efforts in peacebuilding are critical to community-level resilience and help address gaps in top-down peace processes, which scratch the surface of peacebuilding with fragile elite pacts. Women-led grassroots initiatives bring to the fore issues that formal peace processes overlook in the quest to pacify military and political elites, thus addressing conflict more sustainably than top-down approaches.

CONCLUSION

Women play an important role in inter-ethnic reconciliation at the grassroots level, actively participating in the social reconstruction of society from the bottom up. In this way, they address the gaps left by formal peace processes, which are essentially elite pacts led by male political and military leaders in South Sudan.²⁴ In contrast, women in South Sudan are expanding space for greater participation in the peace process through informal peace networks and initiatives at grassroots levels and coalitions at the national level, and challenging the cultural barriers to build peace. As a result, South Sudanese women are making a strong case for other marginalised women in the Horn of Africa to stand and be counted as consequential actors, players, and stakeholders in peace and security as envisioned by the WPS agenda.

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