

Women's Security in South Sudan: Threats in the Home

As South Sudan emerges from five decades of civil war, security challenges dominate discussions about the country's future. For the majority of women, however, the main threats to their security come not from traditional external sources, such as militia groups or armed conflict with Sudan, but from within their own homes. These threats are rooted in women's lack of empowerment and economic independence, and are deeply embedded in culture and customary practices.

This short paper examines key threats facing South Sudanese women (and, where relevant, girls) in their homes. It begins by looking at the dire health situation, in particular maternal mortality rates. It then examines health security, economic and food (in)security, childbearing risks, and marriage-related insecurity, including domestic violence and widowhood. It draws on fieldwork conducted in 2010 and 2011, including focus groups, interviews with key informants, and a review of the existing literature.¹ Research has reflected the dominance of the Dinka and Nuer tribes and may not apply to all women in all settings in the country.²



A girl stands outside her home with a washbasin in Lologo, near Juba, in January 2011. Much of Juba lacks any amenities, with poor water supply and intermittent electricity. © Phil Moore

Health security

Statistically, pregnancy and childbirth are the greatest threats to women's (and girls') lives in South Sudan. Maternal mortality rates are the highest in the world, estimated at 2,054 per 100,000. The true figure may be even higher since many deaths are not reported, in part because 90 per cent of women give birth away from formal medical facilities and without the help of professionally trained assistants.



Children are prized in South Sudanese society and great pressure is placed on women to have as many as possible, an obligation that is even greater when a large dowry has been paid for a wife. A married woman of childbearing age is expected to become pregnant at least once every three years, and to continue until menopause. It is taboo—although not uncommon—for a man to have sex with a woman while she is lactating, and this convention serves to create a gap between pregnancies.

During the second civil war, female reproduction became not just a societal obligation but also a contribution to the war effort. In an often-quoted speech, former Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) leader Dr John Garang urged the women of South Sudan to stay away from the front lines and produce as many children as possible.³ But it is not only external pressures that lead South Sudanese women to have numerous children: women themselves typically want large families. All the women interviewed for this paper expressed a desire to have as many children as possible. One woman said, 'there is no limit; if I can have 15 or 20, then I will. It is for God to decide.' One pregnant woman interviewed in Upper Nile state, already the mother of four children, explained that the baby she was carrying did not belong to her husband. He had abandoned her five years previously, so she approached the *payam* (district) chief with a request to be 'assigned' another man from the community. This man effectively served as a sperm donor and had no other involvement with the woman or her future offspring. The woman, who works as a cleaner for an international NGO, explained that with both of her parents dead and no siblings to provide support, children were her only guarantee of future security, as well as being a source of happiness and comfort.

Ironically, this drive to ensure future security by having many children leads to a more immediate form of insecurity. One in seven South Sudanese women will die in pregnancy or childbirth, often because of infections (from puerperal fever and retained placenta), haemorrhaging, or obstructed births, with a lack of access to healthcare facilities playing a large role in their deaths. The health sector, like so many other social services in South Sudan, was extremely weak prior to the civil war, and was devastated by the war's end.

Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, numerous international NGOs have supported the over-burdened Ministry of Health as it struggles to build a healthcare system from almost nothing. However, malaria is rife and acute respiratory infections, diarrhoeal diseases, and tuberculosis are common. Sexually transmitted diseases are also prevalent, with one hospital in Upper Nile state reporting syphilis rates of 60–70 per cent in pregnant women who were tested as part of their antenatal care programme.⁴

Since 2005 a new health threat has emerged in South Sudan. While HIV and AIDS have ravaged Africa during the past three decades, the civil war isolated (then) Southern Sudan and prevented HIV/AIDS from taking hold. Since 2005, however, war-displaced people, returning refugees, and foreigners seeking work have flooded into South Sudan, increasing the risks of infection. Public awareness and understanding of HIV/AIDS are very limited. Women, in particular, are vulnerable because they have little control over both the sex they have with their husbands and the sex their husbands have with other women (pre-marital sex is not common.) The

practice of polygamy means that if one person in a marital union is infected, the disease is likely to spread to two or three others, and to the babies born from the marriage. The use of contraceptives, including condoms, is extremely rare in South Sudan.

Economic and food (in)security

The majority of women interviewed for this paper cited hunger as the biggest threat they face. South Sudanese women are the last to eat in their households, taking their food only after the men and children have finished. Women said they had an interest in ensuring that their children received sufficient food, because men with several wives might have numerous children and not care as much for each individual child.

Food security remains a tremendous challenge in South Sudan, where only 4 per cent of arable land is cultivated, and most food and other commodities are imported. While the ‘post-conflict’ food situation has always been precarious, it has worsened since May 2011, when Sudan imposed an unofficial blockade on South Sudan, shutting down numerous cross-border trade routes. Because of these measures, food prices in South Sudan have soared, putting tremendous pressure on families that were already struggling. In October 2011, the South Sudan National Bureau of Statistics reported that all staple foods, such as maize and sorghum, were between 100 and 250 per cent more expensive than a year previously.⁵



A woman in Doro refugee camp grinds grain. She and her family fled Blue Nile state, where the government is carrying out an aerial bombing campaign. © Jared Ferrie

Traditionally, both men and women take part in agricultural activities. Many interviewees spoke nostalgically of halcyon pre-war days when farmed food was plentiful. The war made farming untenable for most South Sudanese and since the signing of the CPA, comparatively few have returned to agriculture. In rural areas



farming is more common but mostly remains at a subsistence level. In many cases, the skills needed to cultivate the land have been lost, while equipment and seeds are also lacking. People are also reluctant to invest in agriculture because of uncertainty about future security. As one woman from Eastern Equatoria said: ‘How can we know what will happen next year? Maybe we will work the land this year and it will all be lost again in war next year.’ Many people also said the weather in recent years had been unfavourable for farming, compared to previous years. A September 2011 assessment carried out by the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization predicted that the food security situation in South Sudan was likely to worsen in 2012, with cereal production possibly falling by 40–60 per cent.⁶ Thirty-seven per cent of South Sudan’s population is already classified as ‘moderately food insecure’, and this figure is expected to rise in the coming year.⁷

With food production at such a low level, the ability to generate income to buy (usually imported, more expensive) food becomes even more crucial. But South Sudan’s nascent economy is desperately weak and very few jobs are available outside of government or NGO work. As there is very little private industry, jobs—particularly outside of urban centres—are extremely scarce. In fact, after so many years of civil war, the concept of a ‘private sector’ is foreign to most South Sudanese. Instead, most people hope, unrealistically, for government jobs. One woman in Upper Nile state echoed the opinions of many interviewees when she said: ‘There has been no change for women since independence; our lives still depend on collecting and selling firewood. The government should be providing jobs through construction works, building schools and facilities.’ She went on to explain that although South Sudanese women cannot be employed in construction because it is seen as men’s work, they could cook and carry. With the Government of South Sudan recording the female adult illiteracy rate at 84 per cent, the vast majority of women are limited to manual work.

Even those women who are fortunate enough to have jobs usually do not have control of their own finances. Women who earn salaries typically take them home to their husbands, who then apportion a certain amount to their wives for food, clothes, and other necessities. If a man has not yet paid off his wife’s dowry, she may be expected to give her salary to her father. An educated Nuer woman who works for an NGO explained: ‘My husband has paid my dowry, which was 30 cows, but he hasn’t yet paid my father for my education; that is another 30 cows. So every month I give my salary to my father, because he is the one whom I owe.’

Marriage

Understanding South Sudan’s marriage traditions and the all-encompassing impact they have on women’s and girls’ lives is crucial to recognizing the human security challenges. In South Sudan, marriage is not simply a matter between two individuals; it is a union of two families. As such, both the marriage and the married life are the concern of the wider community. Although the legal minimum age for marriage is 18 years, girls, particularly in rural areas, often get married much earlier. Such marriages are usually arranged. The men are typically in their early twenties for their first marriages, although marriage of boys in their teens is not uncommon, particularly in rural areas.

Men and women interviewed in Nasir, Upper Nile, said they would consider a daughter to be marriageable at 15 or 16 years of age, but that a girl could be promised to a man much earlier. A suitable man may make a down payment of one cow when a girl is as young as 12. Though she may remain with her family for another three or four years, she is effectively engaged to the man, who is expected to periodically provide more cows to continue building up the girl's dowry and maintain his commitment to the marriage. Girls younger than 12 may also be promised in marriage. In these instances, a man might provide a token such as a ring or bracelet, with cows given to the girl's family when she reaches puberty. One 24-year-old woman said:

I was 11 years old when I was promised in marriage. The man was known to the family and would come to visit. At that time, I was girl, wearing just underwear around my family's home, so when he came to visit I would run and hide from him. I didn't want to marry him, but I didn't have any choice. I had so many brothers who needed cattle [for marriage] and this man came with 30 cattle, so my father forced me to marry him.

The payment of cattle as dowry is fundamental in South Sudanese culture. Since polygamy is widely practised, the more cattle a man obtains, the more wives he may have. The giving and receiving of cattle involves a wide network of family members, with uncles, cousins, and brothers helping the groom pay the dowry. Similarly, the received cattle are distributed among the bride's male family members. Marriage is thus virtually a communal affair, intimately involving a large number of people.



Expectant mothers wait in the prenatal clinic of Aweil civil hospital in January 2011. This is the only hospital in the whole of Northern Bahr al Ghazal. © Phil Moore



Domestic violence

Domestic violence is endemic in South Sudan. While there is little authoritative research on the scale of the problem, anecdotal evidence from organizations and researchers working with women shows that the majority suffer from domestic violence and that it is widely accepted as being a normal part of married life. Anyieth D'Awol, director of the Roots Project, a Juba-based NGO that provides approximately 60 women with livelihood skills and income-earning opportunities, says:

At least once a month, one of the women will be forced off work because she has been physically abused by her husband. It might be beating with a stick, bites, cuts [or] bruises all over. Then others will have to take time off to look after her.

Women do not go to the police to complain about violent husbands. 'They will just laugh at you and tell you to go home,' was a common refrain. Indeed, the vast majority of the women interviewed had accepted domestic violence as part of married life. All of the men interviewed claimed there was usually some kind of justification for beating a woman. One educated man, living in Upper Nile state, said:

If you are part of the family, you can intervene, but if I hear a woman being beaten in another *tukul* [hut] and she is my neighbour, then I can't do anything about it. I don't know what she has done to deserve it, and anyway, the man will accuse me of having an affair with her and will turn on me.

Just as the union of two people is a family matter in South Sudan, the family is often enlisted to arbitrate marital disputes. While a woman is unlikely to seek help from the authorities if her husband abuses her, in cases of severe violence she may turn to the wider family for protection. Although this arrangement offers a system for lodging complaints, the vested interests of, particularly, the woman's family will inevitably play a part in the arbitration process; if there is a divorce, the woman's family will have to return the dowry cattle. Two focus group participants, speaking in Nasir in October 2011, said their friend, who was four months pregnant, had been kicked in the stomach by her husband and admitted to the local hospital the previous day. Although they said she clearly hated and feared her husband, she was forced to return home with him. Her friends explained: 'Where else will she go? What will she do? She cannot divorce him; her family will not accept it.' Another woman, interviewed in Upper Nile, said: 'The man will be very kind and do everything for you until you have had your first or second child. After that he knows you are trapped and [he] can treat you however he wishes.'

While divorce is on the increase in South Sudan, it is still uncommon. This is due to familial pressure to remain in marriages, as well as the issue of who gains custody of the children. In most cases, customary law dictates that the children of a divorced couple remain with the husband, unless they are still breastfeeding, in which case they may stay with the mother until they are weaned. In some communities the law provides that children of divorced parents may stay with the mother until they are six or seven years old. The risk of losing their children forces many South Sudanese women to remain in abusive marriages.

Sexual violence is common within marriage, although it would rarely be described as such, since sex is viewed as a husband's right and prerogative. All the women interviewed for this paper said that sex within marriage occurs when the husband chooses. A woman does not have the right to refuse or to request sexual relations. One midwife working for an international NGO in South Sudan said young women and teenagers married to older men frequently came to the clinic complaining of pain during sex. She said: 'They would never describe it as abuse, but that's what it is.'



Nelwat Meyeek Fadal Mula, pictured on 23 June 2011, stands outside a building in Pariang (Unity state) housing people displaced from Jau by bombings by the Sudan Armed Forces. © Phil Moore

Widowhood

While all women in South Sudan are vulnerable, the situation of widows is particularly precarious. In the Nilotic tribes of South Sudan, traditional practice dictates that a woman only marries once during her life. Even if her husband dies, she is not eligible for remarriage since the marriage bond remains even in death. When a woman is widowed, it is customary practice for her to be cared for by one of her husband's relatives; this is usually a brother, but it may also be another male family member, including a stepson. This second union is not a marriage as such, but a means of maintaining the woman and her children within the family and providing her with more children. In the Dinka language, this man is given the title *lak* meaning 'he who enters the house'. The woman may have children with her husband's relative, but these children will carry the name of the deceased man. Marrying another man outside of the husband's family would be highly unusual since the woman not only remains married to her dead husband but also to his family. As one Dinka woman from Warrap state explained:



If you want to marry again, you must go to court and divorce your husband who has passed away. If you do this, then you will have to return half your dowry and all your children. This would be the only way. But anyway, it is not allowed.

For many women, this arrangement, known as levirate marriage, offers a pragmatic solution, ensuring a form of security. Indeed, widows from higher classes of society who were interviewed for this paper emphasized that they and other women in their position are respected by their communities while also being freed from some of the more onerous duties of a wife.

During the war, however, the practice of levirate marriage was often untenable. The war split communities as many went to fight or fled the country. In this situation, when a man died his wife was unlikely to have recourse to her husband's family members, who may have been hundreds of miles away, in refugee camps, or dead. Achien, 32, from Wau, Western Bahr al Ghazal, lived and travelled with the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) throughout the war, working as a cook and carrier. She, like many other women, took a 'war-time husband', forming a union that was made without the payment of a dowry to her family, making it an unofficial marriage in South Sudanese culture. She had three children with this man. When he was killed in the fighting, she was unable to turn to his family for support. Achien struggled on until the end of the war, and then returned to her own family. 'They wouldn't accept me back and told me they never wanted to see me again, because I had thrown away my chance to bring them a dowry,' she said.

Achien's situation is far from unique. Throughout South Sudan, widowed women are extremely vulnerable. The lack of public safety nets means they have no support. One widow from a well-connected family, who is now a member of parliament, said widows are only given token commemoration on days of national significance:

They remember widows when there is something to be done. Do they want to hear about our suffering? What will they do with it? If you see our widows now you will cry to see their condition. If somebody like me who is an MP and a widow cannot get any support, what about those women in the villages who have nobody to speak for them? They have no chance. They have nobody. Widows are being treated like animals.

Conclusion

Life in the world's newest nation is a daily struggle for the vast majority of its people. Before 9 July 2011, many South Sudanese thought that independence would bring a more prosperous life and greater security. The reality is that the human security situation of most South Sudanese remains precarious. For women in particular, health, food, and personal security needs remain unsatisfied. In the home, the place where they should feel most secure, women face numerous threats. Only by addressing the concept of safety from a human security perspective will it be possible to address these threats.

January 2012

Sudan Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA)

Small Arms Survey * 47 Avenue Blanc * 1202 Geneva * Switzerland
<http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org>



A South Sudanese woman at a public rally on 5 July 2011 organized by the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement, just four days before the country's independence. © Phil Moore

NOTES

¹ Fieldwork for this paper included interviews and focus groups in rural and semi-rural areas around the town of Nasir, Upper Nile state, and its surrounding villages. This decision was made consciously, as much of the literature available on women in South Sudan is based on studies in urban areas, and thus biased towards urban communities. The author also drew on earlier research projects and fieldwork undertaken in Juba, Wau, Rumbek, Torit and Aweil.

² The two dominant tribes in South Sudan, both politically and numerically, are the Dinka and the Nuer, accounting for 40 per cent and 20 per cent of the population, respectively. Although these two tribes have some practices that are distinct from one another, both are Nilotic cattle keepers and share many cultural and social practices. Other tribal groups each account for less than 10 per cent of the population.

³ Stone, Lydia. 2011. "'We Were All Soldiers': Female Combatants in South Sudan.' In Friederike Bubenzer and Orly Stern, eds. *Hope, Pain and Patience: The Lives of Women in South Sudan*. Johannesburg: Jacana, p.29.

⁴ A number of other diseases may affect a syphilis test, resulting in either a false positive or, indeed, a false negative. This caveat notwithstanding, the number of reported cases in the hospital in question is extraordinarily high.

⁵ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 2011. "*Weekly Humanitarian Bulletin*". 27 October. <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_2787.pdf>.

⁶ South Sudan Ministry of Agriculture. 2011. *Rapid Crop Assessment Report*, September, p. 5.

⁷ World Food Programme. 2011 *South Sudan Food Security Monitoring*, October, p.1.