Gender Norms, Conflict, and Aid in South Sudan

> *This briefing paper is based on a small piece of research conducted in February 2017 by Kuyang Harriet Logo (independent consultant) and Ranga Gworo (CSRF research adviser) for the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF). It is intended to inform CSRF donors and implementing partners about some of the implications of international assistance on trends related to gender norms and conflict. Interviews and focus group discussions were carried out in Rumbek and Yambio after a light literature review. Ethical considerations and restrictions to the research are outlined in the main research paper. This briefing paper summarises the main findings and recommendations from the research. It was written by Hesta Groenewald (CSRF/Saferworld technical adviser).*

Introduction

South Sudan continues to experience high levels of violent conflict at national, sub-national and community levels. Past alliances and injustices feed some of today's violence; but newer grievances and dynamics are also at play in conflict about political power and representation. Relationships between South Sudanese are increasingly strained as divisions deepen between identity groups, notably along ethnic lines. The country has seen an alarming increase in sexual and gender-based violence – mainly reported against women. This is partly due to increasing levels of violence of all descriptions across the country. Yet some of the gender norms in South Sudanese society also appear to contribute to the ways in which conflicts play out and violence is perpetrated within and between communities.

> **What are gender norms and violent masculinities?**
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> Gender norms are *expectations* about how people of each gender should behave, according to notions of masculinity and femininity. These norms are not determined by biological sex but rather are specific to particular cultures or societies. They also change over time.
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> *Masculinity* refers to the culturally-specific behaviours associated with men and boys – the different ways of being a man. When violence is a part of this set of behaviours, it is referred to as *violent masculinities* or *violent notions of masculinity*.

Gender norms and conflict

Greater Lakes State (GLS)[1] area has a history of violent clashes between communities and clans about cattle – a key source of wealth and status in communities, including for paying bride price. These clashes most often manifest as cattle raids and revenge attacks; conflicts over resources such as water and grazing; and marriage-related disputes. Violent crimes like armed robbery and rape also occur. In recent years, conflict internal to GLS has increased in a complex cycle of competition, violence (including rape) and revenge. While the national-level conflict is primarily driven by ethnicised and exclusionary politics, the existence of local-level violent conflicts and a new influx of arms have facilitated mobilisation of existing armed groups by ambitious national and state-level politicians.

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[1] The 10-state administrative units are used for ease and clarity of reference.

In the mostly pastoralist communities of GLS, gender inequality is deeply entrenched and actively promoted by customary practices. Gender norms relating to masculinity dictate a strong protector and authority role for men, with women in subservient positions. Violence against women is widespread and seemingly accepted, particularly if women are suspected of being unfaithful. Women respondents described how women and girls are seen as valuable because of the cattle their bride price brings to the family. The insecurity and dire economic situation makes it impossible for many young men to afford the expensive bride price for Dinka women, so many engage in cattle raiding to achieve the requisite number of cattle, while some marry women from elsewhere for a smaller bride price in cash or cattle.

Boys undergo initiation ceremonies to become men and are expected not to show fear or pain during this process. When threats arise to the community – such as cattle raids or a girl being abducted without the proper dowry being paid – young men are expected to protect or restore community assets and honour through violent responses. They are under pressure never to accept defeat, but instead to keep fighting until they are victorious. Women strengthen these expectations by composing songs rebuking cowardice or praising bravery. When their fighters have won a battle, they sometimes make flags with their clan emblem to signify the victory. The communal pressure to perform this role is strong and a man's standing in the community can be made or broken by his willingness to participate or his successes in battle. Women are not expected to take part in active fighting.

"If we can look into where things were before now and before the constant conflicts, if we stop playing the roles that are expected of us, the conflict will end. As conflicts increase so do the consequences, so when we realize where the problem started, how it felt when we were together, we would find out where we went wrong…"
Young male respondent, GLS, February 2017

Both men and women are seriously affected by the violence, sometimes leading to changes in gender behaviours, with the potential for changing gender norms. Young men in cattle camp groups are usually armed and those who cannot acquire weapons or do not wish to fight may go back to their communities. There they have undertaken work traditionally done by women and girls, such as cutting grass for thatching roofs. Many men have been killed in the fighting, or have fled or gone to towns to find jobs. Women have therefore taken on traditionally male roles, becoming heads of households and breadwinners for their families.

Western Equatoria State (WES)[2] experienced past conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)[3] and the local Arrow Boys militia[4], as well as between South Sudanese communities about land access and use. Since 2014, the increased movement of cattle-keeping groups into the area has caused conflict as cattle destroyed crops and land conflicts flared up. The involvement of the national army (the SPLA) and the mobilisation of local youth resulted in the violent targeting of civilians, destruction of property and displacement. The same groups have often become politicised and drawn into various opposition movements. Respondents described an influx of weapons and an increase in revenge attacks, which they saw as a new trend in conflicts in their areas.

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[2] The 10-state administrative units are used for ease and clarity of reference.
[3] The Lord Resistance Army are the Ugandan rebel group that was operational in the borderlands around WES
[4] 'Arrow Boy' are a community defense force that took up arms between 2005 and 2015 to protect the local population initially against the Lord Resistance Army.

Gender inequality in WES is seen as slightly more fluid than in GLS due to regular interaction with people from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR), where women and men both engage in questions of public interest. Still, respondents recognised that patriarchal norms accorded more authority and resources to men, which undermined the potential for women to advance and participate in society. Initiatives to inform women of their rights and to empower them economically are welcomed to some extent. But some respondents (male and female) blamed these initiatives for increasing divorce rates and violence against women from their husbands, as women become economically independent. This seems to indicate a high level of resistance to changing gender norms. Displaced men and women both reported being unable to fulfil their expected roles of earning an income and taking care of their families due to the difficult circumstances.

As in GLS, men and boys in WES have a socially-assigned duty to protect and defend their communities. While women have often encouraged men and boys to fight, they have also protested to the state authorities about the army's actions towards local communities. In past conflicts, they have been instrumental in convincing men and boys to stop fighting. However, recently women and girls have joined the armed groups as fighters and spies in large numbers – one respondent claimed up to 40% of combatants.[5] They appear to feel insufficiently protected and want to take an active role in protecting themselves and their assets by acquiring weapons, which they see as the ultimate tools of power.

In addition to the changed role of women actively fighting, women in remote areas also undertake traditionally male activities like farming and collecting humanitarian assistance because the men fear arrest if they leave home.

Gender norms and peace processes

In both areas, respondents saw women as suffering most from conflict and violence, and therefore accepted that women had an important role to play in trying to resolve conflicts.

"[Women] protest, fast and pray, and wear mourning clothes or sing sad songs to evoke the men to stop any fighting. When the government failed to implore the youth to return home, women were tasked to speak to their men, children to return home and that worked, because these men are their husbands, brothers, sons and boyfriends"
Respondent in WES, February 2017

Young men combatants in GLS reported being unable to engage in talking about peace, as they were expected to continue fighting at all costs. They are also under political pressure because of ethnic or political loyalties to continue fighting. These respondents felt that only men who are affiliated to the church or international actors, or who are chiefs, would be able to engage in peace processes.

Impacts of international assistance

Generally, respondents felt that internally provided humanitarian assistance was provided in a participatory way that brought communities together without aggravating existing conflicts or divisions.

With respect to gender norms, some assistance reinforces existing gender roles while others aim at specifically empowering women. For instance, in Food for Assets programmes, women and girls often

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[5] The researchers also observed young male and female members of the Arrow Boys parading in Yambio town, belonging to the faction that signed a peace deal with the government.

perform traditional tasks like cooking and carrying water, while men and boys undertake tasks that require more physical strength, like construction and carrying heavy sacks of grain and sorghum. Where families have no male members present, other men from the community assist them.

The WFP Purchase for Profits programme in WES purchases from women farmers specifically as a gender empowerment measure. Respondents noted that while some men were unhappy with this, no serious disputes arose and most people see an increased income for women as benefiting the whole family. Some women have taken on a non-traditional breadwinner role by selling items, including some of the food assistance, in the markets and using the income for other family needs like school fees.

Women's empowerment programmes have clearly had an impact in increasing women's awareness of their rights and their ability to be economically and socially independent. But they also face resistance and sometimes violent backlash from their families and communities.

Conclusions and recommendations

South Sudan continues to be in a process of – often very violent – transformation of people's livelihoods, political representation options and social and gender norms. The research highlights some interesting trends regarding the links between gender norms, conflict and peace, but only provides a small snapshot. Further research and direct engagement with communities on these issues are necessary to really understand both how traditional gender norms are fuelling violence and prohibiting or promoting peace; and how some of the negative norms are being questioned. The conflicts are also having a direct impact on gender roles and behaviours, which have the potential to empower women and improve gender equality, but also have the potential to aggravate the vulnerabilities of men and women who would like to think differently about their gender identities and their gendered roles in conflict and peace.

The international community interacts with a fluid and complex context where gender norms and identities are one of many factors to consider when striving for conflict-sensitive assistance. To ensure that assistance does not entrench harmful and violent gender norms and supports opportunities for peace, it is important to:
- Support communities to reflect on and address gender norms that promote violence and conflict, particularly regarding the pressures on men and boys to fight in a context of identity-fuelled conflict; and the perceived challenges for combatant men and boys to engage in peace processes.
- Encourage women to participate in political and peace building processes through creating awareness activities such as dances, drama, and storytelling and enhance the role of civil society organisations working on women's empowerment.
- Ensure assistance programmes – including women's empowerment initiatives – anticipate and mitigate likely negative impacts on women and girls, and on relationships between them and the men and boys in their communities and to provide psychological or trauma support, public awareness and legal services for the victims.
- Specifically understand why women and girls in WES are joining the armed groups and ensure that any externally-supported peacebuilding or disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) efforts include them
- Better understand the links between masculine norms that promote violence and the subordination of women on the one hand, and sexual and gender-based violence (including within the family) on the other.