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Gendered experiences of return and displacement in South Sudan: developing gender-sensitive policies and programming



Overview

People in South Sudan have experienced decades of forced displacement and cross-border mobility, resulting in families being split across the country as well as across neighbouring Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda. As of 2021, more than four million South Sudanese citizens have been displaced. Over the past four years, over 500,000 refugees and over 1.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to their place of habitual residence.

This policy brief discusses the rupture that displacement and return constitute in the lives of women and argues for a more gender-sensitive approach to policy design and programming around mobility in South Sudan.

Report & Partner Reference

This policy brief builds on the key findings of a study developed in a partnership between the Research and Evidence Facility (REF) – funded by the European Union Trust Fund (EUTF) – and Samuel Hall, a social enterprise dedicated to migration and displacement research. The REF research team conducted the literature review used in the study, and Samuel Hall's research team led field research in the study's focus countries with local researchers and conducted the analysis and drafting of the final report '*South Sudan's decades of displacement: Understanding return and questioning reintegration*'. Over 1,000 respondents were interviewed for this study between December 2021 and February 2022. Research locations included Juba, Kajo Keji, Wau and Malakal in South Sudan; refugee hosting areas in Gambella and Benishangul Gumuz in Ethiopia; Kakuma and Kalobeyei in Kenya; and Bidi refugee settlement and Kampala in Uganda.

Ordinary ruptures: gendered patterns of mobility in South Sudan

Patterns of mobility in and outside South Sudan are characterised by continuity and discontinuity. Decisions to move or return represent a rupture from earlier practices of migration, and from cultural and family dynamics. But they contain an element of continuity, as they are embedded in traditional practices as people move along paths and routes they have known before. Besides indicating a break from the past, the concept of rupture refers to "new meanings and realities being produced" (Mazurana & Procter, 2019) and involves new departures and beginnings (either voluntary or involuntary).

The concept of rupture poses profound questions about the idea of 'sustainability' in reintegration or of 'durable solutions' in unstable situations. Moreover, recognising *when and where* rupture occurs and to what

extent there is some continuity, as well as *what the consequences* of a rupture are, is important to inform future policy related to the migration, displacement and return of South Sudanese.

This policy brief focuses on the gendered implications of rupture in the lives of South Sudanese displaced households in order to inform the development of gender-sensitive policies and interventions. It develops the central premise that migration, including displacement and return migration, is a gendered phenomenon experienced differently by men and women.

Women's experiences of migration, displacement and return: lack of safety as the primary concern

The literature suggests, and our study confirms that women experience greater challenges than men along their migration journeys, including after return. These challenges include women's subordinate position in the household, limited participation in public affairs, restricted mobility and access to education, health and employment. Besides this, displaced women generally struggle to access justice and protection mechanisms and face difficulties reclaiming housing, land and property (HLP) upon return.

Women tend to face more exposure to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) than men, both in the domestic sphere and at the hands of armed soldiers.¹ The female respondents who participated in the study reported experiencing SGBV, marital rape, forced and early marriages both in camps and in return settings. Across all areas, female research participants were more likely to report feeling unsafe while walking at night compared to male respondents. They spoke about the challenges of preserving their ability to remain mobile to preserve their safety and survival.

If mothers cannot go to the forest and collect firewood to cook food for their children, then who else is safe in this

¹ UN Human Rights Council, "Conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls in South Sudan: Conference Room Paper of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan," 21 March 2022

(UN Doc. A/HRC/49/CRP.4), para. 45, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/A_HRC_49_CRP_4.pdf.

community? I have not many words to say because the problem is obvious. For example, last year a woman I know personally was killed while she went to a nearby forest to collect firewood for cooking.

This structural lack of security is one of the factors that make returns unsustainable for many women and their households, and which prevent voluntary returns from occurring. In particular, SGBV strongly limits the mobility space of women and girls and influences their attitudes and perceptions towards return.

Observing that SGBV and forced marriages are more prevalent in South Sudan than in Uganda, a refugee in Kampala and a second refugee in Bidi remarked that: *“if gender violations are solved [in South Sudan] and people sensitised not to commit those violations, then refugees can consider returning home”*. Conversely, abusive situations and domestic violence may trigger a decision to escape.

Addressing the lack of safety in South Sudan and combating the risk of SGBV to which women are exposed daily needs to be a key priority for both the national government and humanitarian and development practitioners working in the country.

Split families and support networks

For displaced persons, splitting families across borders, within South Sudan, across camps and in urban contexts is a strategy that may help distribute risks while increasing the chances to access education, housing and income. Our study found that 44% of survey respondents had left some family members behind as they embarked on their latest migration.

Family reconfiguration across geographies is necessary in a context where multiple shocks (conflict, flooding and, most recently, Covid-19) have forced and continue to force many to move in search of protection. These separations do not fall neatly into a voluntary or forced continuum but constitute a rupture in the lives of the displaced, marking the restructuring of roles and responsibility within households.

Highly gendered patterns of household splitting have been identified in the study. Generally, women tend to remain in camps with children, while men are more mobile and tend to cross international borders, something which often leads to the loss of meaningful family contacts. Many of the women interviewed for this study had not seen their husbands in months or years.

Alongside this, after households split, different support networks are available to men and women. Social norms affect men and women differently, and women can rely on more than vertical relations relating to status and power. Our data suggest that women may benefit in different ways than men from location-based support systems that transcend clan and nationality divisions. The structure of South Sudanese families has traditionally allowed women to build horizontal relations and networks outside the stricter clan and age hierarchies that characterise a male-centred society. These horizontal relations can also be used to support dialogue and peace-building efforts between divided groups.

Women's support and solidarity networks are key to coping with the risks associated with migration and displacement. A woman living in the former Wau Protection of Civilians (PoC) camp told our researchers:

[The] Women's group [in Naivasha camp] support me materially in terms of soaps, sugar and tea leaves from our women's Sanduk [collective fund box]. This Sanduk supports everyone in the group.

The empowering and disempowering effects of displacement

Migration and displacement break down the social and family networks that women rely on, but at the same time may open new opportunities for them, as traditional gender norms are renegotiated and women gain exposure to education and empowerment programmes in camp settings (Grabska, 2013). When they are left behind as the result of a household splitting decision, or when they start living without a male relative, women's

decision-making powers increase dramatically, and they are required to decide for themselves and other dependent family members. Up to 80% of displaced households in South Sudan are reportedly female-headed (Oxfam International, 2019). Many of the women interviewed for this study had not seen their husbands in months or years and could therefore assume higher levels of responsibility. When this happens, women become more mobile, and start playing a more active social role.

I am free to decide where I can go; I don't consult anybody because my husband is not alive. I am the mother of my children and I am also their father. So, I make my decisions independently.

At the same time, these experiences contribute to the creation of more solid, localised support networks among women. Female heads of households interviewed reported relying on such systems of support, which are key to coping with risks such as exposure to SGBV and lack of personal safety, as explained above by the woman living in the former Wau PoC.

These flexible social arrangements cut across age and ethnic lines and are essential for women to create a common sense of belonging, rooted in a shared location and a shared displacement experience. Moreover, in camp settings women can access empowerment programmes tailored to their needs offered by UN agencies and NGOs; these are generally less available to men. By participating in such programmes, women, especially those coming from rural areas, are exposed to concepts that might be new to them, such as human rights, entrepreneurship, financial planning and financial independence.

On the other hand, the experiences of migration, displacement and return can generally be disempowering for men, young men in particular. While they have more freedom to move (and return) than women, young men tend to experience a loss of identity during migration, displacement and return. They face difficulties meeting traditional social standards related to masculinity, and they are

confronted with the idea of failure when they don't meet such expectations.

A male respondent interviewed in the context of the study moved away from his close family and returned to Wau to retake control of his life and distance himself from family responsibilities that he could not fulfil. Having failed to access livelihood opportunities and his family's previously owned property, he preferred to remain in Wau and avoid confronting his family's disappointment and his aborted path to adulthood (SSI 163). This example shows the difficulty of living up to social expectations about traditional masculinity, and how 'return' and mobility are at the same time a potential avenue to fulfil these expectations and a means to escape them. This type of behaviour is consistent with mobility practices observed during the study, and calls for more targeted attention to be paid to young men and the gendered challenges they face at different stages of their migration journeys.

Key policy recommendations

Humanitarian and development actors should:

- **Develop gender-responsive programming in host countries and South Sudan based on in-depth gender analyses in refugee-hosting, displacement and return settings.**
 - Develop gender-responsive programming focused on SGBV prevention and response. An example of this would be the provision of safe shelters for individuals at risk of SGBV and for SGBV survivors.
 - Engage the community in activities aimed at deconstructing traditional gender norms that limit women's agency and place 'masculine' expectations on men.
 - Integrate gender considerations into planning and response, and collect data disaggregated by gender and age during monitoring and evaluation exercises.
 - Develop programmes with a focus on gender to support men coping with the gendered challenges related to their experience of displacement.
 - Support the integration of both men and women in local communities and civil society organisations in countries of origin and destination.
 - Offer counselling sessions to both men and women along their migration journeys.

The Government of South Sudan should:

- **Include women in peace-building efforts and benefit from their ability to build and maintain networks across locations, and ethnic and tribal divides.**
 - Develop strategies to engage and strengthen the capacity of women as peace builders and create a space for them to connect, network, and engage in discussions within and across borders.
- **Engage with donors, humanitarian and development actors and communities to find ways of enhancing the safety and security conditions** in the former PoC and IDP camps, as well as in urban locations.
- **Ensure that women's rights to HLP are respected and fulfilled.**
 - Develop and operationalise the formal legal framework on HLP.
 - Develop gender-sensitive policies to address women's access to HLP through targeted support by addressing legal and practical obstacles related to social constructions of gender.
 - Support female-headed households through a package of HLP, education and cash-based support.

Donors should:

- **Ensure funding for gender-sensitive programming in the region and in South Sudan**, with a specific focus on strengthening local capacity and the social cohesion of refugee, returnees and IDPs.

References

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