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Climate Disasters, Mass Violence, and Human Mobility in South Sudan: Through a Gender Lens

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Introduction

Local conditions in South Sudan during the 10-plus years that have elapsed since its independence on July 9, 2011, have led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians, including a high proportion of women and children, and the displacement of millions more. Large-scale, systematic violence intensified after a new conflict erupted in December 2013. Violent conflict and an array of rapid and slow onset climate disasters have coalesced to create widespread catastrophic circumstances. While political violence has declined after the so-called Revitalized Peace Agreement (A-RCSS; Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan) was signed in 2018, communal violence has not abated.¹

Additionally, environmental challenges including both droughts and severe flooding as well as locust swarms have resulted in widespread crop and property damage in the affected regions. Famine was declared in 2017,² with current conditions being classified as widespread acute food insecurity and acute malnutrition.³ As of November 2021, over 800,000 people were reported as affected by flooding in areas along the Nile and Lol rivers, and in Sudd marshlands since May 2022. Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile States are the worst affected. Across vast stretches of these regions, thousands of people are crammed onto patches of high ground bound by stacks of sandbags, as floodwaters have risen to the brink of the sandbag walls for the third consecutive year.⁴ An additional 2.3 million South Sudanese remain refugees hosted in neighboring countries.⁵

Women and girls have often borne the brunt of the multiple shocks and stresses pummeling the world's newest country. From the onset of the conflict, government and opposition forces committed grave acts of sexual violence, targeting victims based on their gender, ethnic, and perceived political identities. Thousands of women and girls, but also civilian men, boys, and children, have been subjected to brutal forms of sexual violence, including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, sexual mutilation and torture, and sexual humiliation.⁶ Levels of sexual violence, high even during inter-war periods, skyrocketed as

¹ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, "Surface Tension: 'Communal' Violence and Elite Ambitions in South Sudan" (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, August 19, 2021), 1–37, accessed June 30, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep34331>.

² "Famine Declared in Region of South Sudan—UN," *UN News*, February 20, 2017, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/02/551812-famine-declared-region-south-sudan-un>.

³ "South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity and Malnutrition Situation January 2019 and Projections for February–April 2019 and May–July 2019," *Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC)*, February 22, 2019, accessed March 11, 2021, <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1151975/?iso3=SSD>.

⁴ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "South Sudan Floods: The Cost of Inaction as of November 2021," November 17, 2021, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-floods-cost-inaction-november-2021>.

⁵ UN OCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview: South Sudan* (s.l.: UN OCHA Humanitarian Country Team, February 2022), 6, May 7, 2022, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/hno_ssd_2022_26feb2022.pdf.

⁶ Devon Cone, *Still in Danger: Women and Girls Face Sexual Violence in South Sudan Despite Peace Deal* (Washington, DC: Refugees International, October 2019), 1–28, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8ea1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/5da7a363aede156263052d42/1571267435576/South+Sudan+-+Devon+-+October+2019+-+1.0.pdf>.

the conflict spread into previously peaceful areas of the country.⁷ Once civil war fueled by ethnic divisions engulfed the country in 2013, violence against women and girls grew even more pronounced. From 2013 until the end of 2018, soldiers on both sides of the conflict used sexual violence and torture, especially on women and girls, as part of their military strategies. Furthermore, a complete breakdown of the rule of law permitted armed men to operate with impunity throughout the conflict.

Although most political violence abated when the most recent peace agreement was signed in September 2018, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) has persisted. Violence toward civilians remains pervasive, including targeted attacks, gender-based violence, kidnappings, and murders. Additionally, water-borne diseases, malaria, malnutrition, and diarrhea are widespread in the regions affected by flooding and are affecting primarily women and children.⁸ Many men have left to search for work and have not returned, leaving mothers to fend for themselves and their often-numerous children. Burning and pillaging of homes and livestock is still rampant. Fueled by hunger and desperation, assaults on aid convoys and the looting of supplies have become increasingly common, making it both difficult and dangerous for humanitarian efforts to reach in-need families with the support they require to survive.

The intersection of these multiple crises has displaced nearly 4 million South Sudanese, about half of whom have fled to neighboring countries, mainly Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda, resulting in Africa's largest refugee crisis since the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Repeated displacement has been common as people have sought to cope with highly volatile conditions by moving to different places both within and across national borders. Those who have been forced to flee their homes have lost loved ones and their homes, their land, and their livelihoods. Widespread displacement exacerbates other risks to the safety of women and girls, including intimate partner violence and underage pregnancy.

Despite these seemingly insurmountable challenges, South Sudanese women have made significant strides in their push for inclusion in national peace processes. Even when displaced and, in some cases, especially when in displacement contexts, women are becoming increasingly politically organized. This is particularly the case at the community or grass-roots level. Women's voices are, however, not always heard in high-level discussions, underscoring the need for more inclusive, multi-track peacebuilding efforts.

Informed by a feminist political ecological framework, and based on research conducted in South Sudan and in refugee camps in Uganda, this article presents some of the findings of a larger longitudinal study of the gender-environment-security nexus in South Sudan and neighboring countries. The information for the section of the project discussed here was collected through a combination of desk research and multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in the fall of 2018 and spring/summer of 2019. Part of this work was facilitated by the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). This ongoing study is currently being conducted remotely by colleagues from Assistance Mission for Africa (AMA), a Juba-based humanitarian and development organization in whose board of directors I have served since 2018. Field data-gathering methods include focus-group discussions and key informant interviews conducted with women and girls in both countries. Participatory resource mapping, risk calendars, and gender and conflict analysis tools were also implemented with study participants.

Following this introductory section, I outline the context of mass violence and environmental fragility and displacement in this beleaguered African country, with a focus on gender-differentiated impacts. I then turn my attention to the massive displacement affecting a large proportion of the population. The local responses to these compounded crises, and the

⁷ Marisa O. Ensor, "South Sudanese Women on the Move: Their Roles in Conflict and Peacebuilding," *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung*, November 2, 2020), accessed June 26, 2022, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/migration-integration/laenderprofile/english-version-country-profiles/317971/south-sudanese-women-on-the-move-their-roles-in-conflict-and-peacebuilding/>.

⁸ Malene Kamp Jensen, "South Sudan Villages Are Under Water Making Children Sick," *UNICEF*, November 22, 2021, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-villages-are-under-water-making-children-sick>.

gender-specific challenges and opportunities facing women and girls in their efforts to overcome a legacy of violence, environmental crises and displacement are discussed next. I conclude my analysis by re-emphasizing the significance of adopting a gender-sensitive approach to humanitarian programming in mass violence, climate disasters, forced displacement, and other complex emergency situations.

The Context of Mass Violence and Environmental Fragility

The links between gender, mass violence, climate change, and human mobility are complex, often interrelated and mutually constitutive. Rather than constituting a direct causal factor of the identity-based violence that has characterized the various phases of conflict in South Sudan, climate change has been found to act as a threat multiplier that leads to displacement and exacerbates the risk of conflict. In some cases, displacement is the intervening factor between adverse environmental conditions and mass violence while, in other cases, displacement is itself the consequence of climate-induced conflict. Women and girls face greater burdens from the impacts of climate change, environmental shocks and stresses, food insecurity and displacement, given the subordinated position they occupy in South Sudanese society. The opportunities to engage in peacebuilding, natural resource governance, and human rights activism available to them—and the ones they are creating for themselves—are also gender-differentiated.

Overview of the Conflict

The area now recognized as South Sudan has a long history of mass violence and displacement, having experienced waves of armed conflict since the 1950s. The war ended in 2005 following lengthy political negotiations. A referendum on independence was held from January 9–15, 2011, resulting in the Republic of South Sudan becoming an independent nation on July 9, 2011. The official ceasefire and subsequent independence facilitated the return of large numbers of refugees. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that 2.5 million South Sudanese had returned by 2012.⁹

High hopes for the young nation were dashed two years later, when South Sudan again plunged into violent conflict. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the ruling party, imploded in a power struggle between President Salva Kiir, a member of the Dinka ethnic group, and his former Vice President, Riek Machar, a Nuer. The majority Dinka and the minority Nuer are the two largest groups in South Sudan and have a history of bloody feuding. As the national army was divided along Dinka-Nuer ethnic lines, soldiers from each faction turned against each other in Juba, the nation's capital. The fighting between those loyal to Kiir (SPLM-in-government, or SPLM-IG) and Machar's supporters (SPLM-in-opposition, or SPLM-IO) soon spread across the country giving way to a deadly pattern of revenge and counter-revenge attacks. Government forces targeted civilians in areas of high Nuer concentration, claiming that their aim was to push back against rebel fighters. The failure of several initial attempts to secure an effective peace agreement among the various parties within the government resulted in renewed fighting in mid-July 2016. The intensification of violence hampered aid delivery to vulnerable populations across the country.¹⁰ Restrictions imposed by the Government of South Sudan on the UN Mission in the country (known as UNMISS)

⁹ International Organization for Migration, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning South Sudanese: First Draft Strategy*, (Geneva: IOM, March 2012), 4–5. Source cited is an internal report.

¹⁰ Marisa O. Ensor, "Youth's Role in South Sudan's Perfect Storm: Climate Change, Conflict, and the Prospects for Peacebuilding in the World's Newest Nation," *Global Peace Services USA* 19, no. 3 (2018).

continued to tighten. Inter-communal conflicts also intensified,¹¹ often centering on competition over land for pasture, cattle raiding, and the abduction of women or children.¹²

Multiple peace deals and ceasefires were almost immediately violated until a new “revitalized” peace agreement, known as A-RCSS, was reached in 2018. The cessation of hostilities has largely held, with partial but noteworthy progress being made in some areas. Peace, nevertheless, remains tenuous—an unsurprising outcome given how pervasive political instability and armed struggles have been in South Sudan for most of its almost nine years of independence. The latest war (2013–2018) resulted in an estimated 382,900 casualties¹³ and forced nearly 4.5 million to flee their homes.¹⁴ The human and environmental costs of the conflict have been staggering, differentially and disproportionately impacting women and girls.

Violence against Women and Girls

When civil war engulfed the country again in 2013, egregious human rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), were perpetrated with near complete impunity.¹⁵ The already high levels of sexual violence skyrocketed as the conflict spread into previously peaceful areas of the country after the signing of the August 2015 peace agreement. This was particularly prevalent in the period following the clashes that re-erupted in the capital city, Juba, in July 2016. Armed men affiliated with various military groups routinely attacked women and girls at gunpoint; those on their way to fetch water and fuelwood, heading to food distribution sites and, ironically, forcibly displaced women and girls fleeing violence and environmental disasters in their home villages, have been the most likely targets.¹⁶ Whether conflict-related or committed in times of peace, SGBV is a pervasive crime in most cultural traditions in South Sudan given their pronounced male-centric standpoint.¹⁷

In Unity State, which experienced some of the most intensive violence throughout the conflict, government troops committed gruesome acts of gang rape, abducting women, and keeping them as sex slaves. Between May and December 2015, one of the heaviest periods of fighting in the area, humanitarian organizations estimated that 1,200 civilians were killed, 1,430 raped, and 1,630 abducted in locations such as Leer, Koch, and Mayendit.¹⁸

A 2022 report issued by the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan found that “these attacks are not random opportunistic incidents but usually involve armed soldiers

¹¹ Dan Watson, “Surface Tension: ‘Communal’ Violence and Elite Ambitions in South Sudan,” *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project* (ACLED), 19 August, 2021, 1–43, accessed July 4, 2022, <https://acleddata.com/2021/08/19/surface-tension-communal-violence-and-elite-ambitions-in-south-sudan/>.

¹² David K. Deng, *Challenges of Accountability: An Assessment of Dispute Resolution Processes in Rural South Sudan* (Juba: South Sudan Law Society, March 2013), 1–117, accessed June 26, 2022, https://www.pactworld.org/sites/default/files/Challenges%20of%20Accountability_FINAL%20May%202016.pdf.

¹³ Francesco Checchi et al., *Estimates of Crisis-Attributable Mortality in South Sudan, December 2013–April 2018: A Statistical Analysis* (London: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, September 2018), 19, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/south-sudan-full-report>.

¹⁴ Daniel P. Sullivan, *Displaced Nation: The Dangerous Implications of Rushed Returns in South Sudan* (Washington, DC: Refugees International, November 2018), 7, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8ea1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/5c016929575d1ff2db20dd62/1543596335696/South+Sudan+Report+-+November+2018+-+1137+11.30.pdf>.

¹⁵ United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on South Sudan (Covering the Period from 1 December to 26 February 2019)*, February 28, 2019 (UN Doc, S/2019/191), accessed March 12, 2021, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/S_2019_191_E.pdf.

¹⁶ Cone, *Still in Danger*.

¹⁷ Haki, *Combating Gender-Based Violence in the Customary Courts of South Sudan* (s.l.: Haki, 2011), 1–65, accessed March 11, 2021, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f7ba98e4b01f78d142c414/t/53ffdb13e4b0bf4098a1194d/1409276691505/Combating+GBV+in+South+Sudan_Haki.pdf.

¹⁸ “Untold Suffering in South Sudan as Conflict Enters Fifth Year,” *Amnesty International* (website, n.d.), accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/12/end-the-suffering-of-south-sudanese-people-now/>.

actively hunting down women and girls.”¹⁹ Rape carried out during attacks on villages are systematic and widespread. Although most political violence abated after the signing of the R-ARCSS, SGBV has persisted and, in some cases, violence against women and girls has increased. Violent crimes against women and girls during times of conflict take place in a context of pronounced patriarchy and gender inequality. 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 healthcare 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).²⁰

A complete breakdown of the rule of law has permitted armed men to operate with impunity before, throughout, and after the official end of the conflict. The situation is compounded by the National Police Service’s limited capacity, and their tendency to refer cases to customary courts. Customary courts are primarily responsible for the administration of justice throughout the country, and application of customary law remains the primary mechanism. Many of these customary and local institutions, including traditional courts are, however, largely ill-equipped to adjudicate cases of violence against women and girls that has been made more prevalent by conflict and the associated breakdown of traditional community and family structures. Furthermore, customary traditions are often in conflict both with international human rights principles, and with the rights of women and children established by the Interim Constitution of South Sudan.²¹

Environmental Insecurity

Anthropogenic climate change exacerbates and compounds this already complex picture. A changing climate will alter the frequency, intensity, duration, timing, and location of slow- and sudden-onset of climate-related hazards. According to the *Climate Change Vulnerability Index*, South Sudan is among the five most vulnerable countries in the world, with temperatures increasing 2.5 times faster than the global average.²² Environmental conditions are becoming increasingly arid, with intensified and prolonged periods of drought punctuated by erratic and brief, but torrential rains. These conditions promote both violence and displacement.

Although there is a wide range of seasonal and yearly variation, overall rainfall has decreased by 10 to 20 percent, and temperatures have increased by more than 1°C since the middle of the 1970s.²³ At the same time, the frequency of extreme weather events such as droughts and floods has increased significantly, with more than 55 percent of the South Sudanese population being directly affected.²⁴ Inadequate rainfall in 2018 exacerbated the effects of the conflict and slashed crop production, with only 52 percent of the national cereal

¹⁹ 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,” March 21, 2022 (UN Doc. A/HRC/49/CRP.4), para. 45, accessed May 2, 2022, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/A_HRC_49_CRP_4.pdf.

²⁰ Jon Greenberg, “UNICEF: More Girls in South Sudan Die in Childbirth than Graduate from High School,” *Politifact*, July 25, 2016, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2016/jul/25/unicef/unicef-more-girls-south-sudan-die-childbirth-gradu/>.

²¹ Haki, *Combating Gender-Based Violence*, 3.

²² “Climate Change Vulnerability Index 2017,” *Verisk Maplecroft* (infographic, November 14, 2016), accessed March 17, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/climate-change-vulnerability-index-2017>.

²³ Chris Funk et al., *A Climate Trend Analysis of Sudan* (Reston: United States Geological Survey [USGS], 2011), 1, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2011/3072/pdf/FS2011-3072.pdf>.

²⁴ Nhial Tiitmamer, *Assessment of Policy and Institutional Responses to Climate Change and Environmental Disaster Risks in South Sudan* (Juba: The Sudd Institute, March 30, 2015), 13, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Assessment%20of%20Policy%20and%20Institutional%20Responses%20to%20Climate%20Change%20and%20Environmental%20Disaster%20Risks.pdf>.

needs being met by recent harvests.²⁵ More than half of the families who could harvest only collected enough food to cover their needs for one to four months, compared to pre-crisis harvests that would be sufficient for seven months.²⁶ Their situation worsened when abnormally heavy rainfall from July to October 2020, led to the overflow of the Nile, Pibor, Sobat, Lol, and other rivers. The rains caused inland flooding, mainly in the eastern and central parts of the country. The flooding eventuated in large-scale displacement of people and cattle, and damaged or destroyed crops and property. An estimated 1,066,000 people were affected by the flooding in eight of ten states and one administrative area in South Sudan between July 2020 and January 2021. Of the people affected, an estimated 504,000 were displaced. An estimated 1,066,000 people were affected from July 1, 2020 to January 31, 2021. Some 495,000 people were affected in Jonglei State and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area were the worst areas.²⁷ Most of them are agro-pastoralists dependent on climate-sensitive activities for their livelihoods, including agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry resources, the gathering of wild foods, and fishing.

Agro-pastoralism is the main means of subsistence in South Sudan's predominantly rural areas, with agro-pastoral communities being increasingly exposed to adverse environmental conditions. These changes have forced pastoralist groups to shift migratory routes for cattle, often leading to local conflicts with farmers and other herders over crop damages and the access to water and grazing resources.²⁸ Not coincidentally, some of the worst communal conflicts have historically occurred in drought-prone regions. Droughts not only create poverty and destitution among cattle keeping communities (thus providing strong incentives for livestock raiding as a means for young herders to improve their livelihoods and be able to provide the bride price, usually paid in cattle, necessary to marry), they also displace large populations and bring them together under stressful conditions, which facilitate conflict over scarce resources. As previously noted, displacement tends to exacerbate women's and girls' vulnerability to additional risks including intimate partner violence and underage pregnancy.

Food Insecurity

Severe food insecurity has been one of the major consequences of the combination of conflict and environmental fragility in South Sudan. When millions of people—including farmers, shopkeepers, and others involved in producing and distributing food—are forced to flee their homes, it becomes difficult to ensure adequate food supplies. Farmlands and cattle have been abandoned, and overall agricultural production has declined drastically. These factors have adversely affected the ability of the South Sudanese population to earn their livelihood and participate in the economy. In early 2017, a famine was declared in parts of South Sudan—the first such declaration since Somalia's in 2011—leaving 100,000 people on the verge of starvation.²⁹ While the famine declaration was lifted in 2018, an estimated 7.2 million people

²⁵ Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), *South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity & Acute Malnutrition Analysis January 2019–July 2019*, February 2019, 1–16, accessed March 21, 2021, http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_South%20Sudan_AFI_2019JanJuly.pdf.

²⁶ Famine Early Warnings System Network (FEWS NET), "South Sudan Food Security Outlook—February 2019 to September 2019: Widespread Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or Worse Outcomes and Risk of Famine (IPC Phase 5) to Persist in 2019" (Washington, DC: FEWS NET, 2019), 1–14, accessed March 20, 2021, https://fews.net/sites/default/files/documents/reports/South%20Sudan%20Food%20Security%20Outlook_022019.pdf.

²⁷ UN OCHA, *South Sudan: Flooding Situation Report, Inter-Cluster Coordination Group* (OCHA South Sudan, January 31, 2021), 1, accessed March 17, 2021, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/south_sudan_flooding_situation_report_31jan2021.pdf.

²⁸ Tom Richardson, "Pastoral Violence in Jonglei," *Inventory of Conflict and Environment (ICE)*, December 2011, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://mandalaprojects.com/ice/ice-cases/jonglei.htm>.

²⁹ UN News, *Famine Declared*. First mentioned in note 1.

remained in need of humanitarian assistance.³⁰ As a result, large-scale humanitarian food assistance needs persisted throughout the region in 2020, reaching their peak during June to September. The risk of famine in certain areas of South Sudan has driven people to IDP settlements in search of assistance.³¹ Study participants report that the price of sorghum (the primary of cereal consumed in South Sudan) is currently 200–350 percent above the five-year average in the country.³²

A UN-backed Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) report accurately projected that during the first half of 2021, an estimated 7.24 million people, or 60 percent of the country's population, would face either a state of official food crisis, a challenging situation that has persisted a year later.³³ As South Sudan's National Policy on Gender recognizes, "although women are the main producers of food, women and children are the most vulnerable to food insecurity because of traditional gender roles that limit their access to and control of productive assets."³⁴

It is also worth noting that South Sudan has very little formal infrastructure—roads, buses, buildings—which makes it difficult to transport food and supplies. Many towns and villages become inaccessible during the annual rainy season due to closed airstrips, washed out roads, or lack of roads altogether, sometimes limiting any delivery of humanitarian aid to the isolated areas that need it most. Travel to several of my own research sites required a combination of cargo planes, helicopters—provided by UNHAS, the UN Humanitarian Air Service—and occasionally canoes. These logistical constraints, combined with the violent context, make reaching people with the humanitarian support they desperately need incredibly challenging and risky.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that 2 million people, including 1.3 million children under the age of 5, and 676,000 pregnant and lactating women, are expected to be acutely malnourished in 2022.³⁵ Women tend to experience greater food insecurity owing to socially ascribed roles as caregivers of children and older persons, which leads to others being prioritized and served food first. Additional cultural barriers include male control over decisions around income generating activities and over income earned, and perceptions that females without male support (such as widows and women-headed households) should not engage in certain service sector activities.³⁶ This practice poses particular challenges for rural women as most female-headed households in South Sudan are found in rural areas, which have also been the most severely impacted by the arrival of locust swarms beginning in 2020.

Locust Swarms

A prolonged bout of exceptionally wet weather, including several rare cyclones that struck eastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, caused massive swarms of locusts to begin forming in 2018. The unusually heavy rain that drenched the otherwise arid deserts of Arabia allowed

³⁰ United States Agency for International Development (USAID), *South Sudan—Crisis: Fact Sheet #7, Fiscal Year (FY) 2019*, June 7, 2019, 1–8, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-crisis-fact-sheet-7-fiscal-year-fy-2019>.

³¹ "Conflict, Economic, and Weather Shocks Drive Elevated Food Assistance Needs in 2021," *Famine Early Warnings System Network*, January 2021, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://fews.net/east-africa/key-message-update/january-2021>.

³² This paper is based on a study that is not yet published.

³³ "IPC South Sudan Alert," *IPC*, December 2020, accessed March 20, 2021, <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/alerts-archive/issue-31/en/>.

³⁴ Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, *National Gender Policy* (Juba: Government of the Republic of South Sudan, 2013), 35.

³⁵ UN OCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview: South Sudan*, 6.

³⁶ Oxfam, *South Sudan Gender Analysis* (s.l.: Oxfam International, March 2017), 59, accessed May 6, 2022, <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620207/rr-south-sudan-gender-analysis-060317-en.pdf>.

locusts to breed unseen in the wet sands. Strong winds in 2019 blew the growing swarms into Yemen's inaccessible conflict zones, then across the Red Sea into Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya. These swarms, which can travel up to 150 kilometers (95 miles) in a day, subsequently spread into Tanzania, Uganda, and South Sudan. By February 2020, an estimated two thousand locusts had crossed into southern Magwi County, Eastern Equatoria State, on the South Sudanese border with Uganda.³⁷

Two months later, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations warned in their Locust Watch report of April 21, 2020, that the situation in the entire East African region remained extremely alarming. The insects, which eat their own body weight in food every day, have been breeding so rapidly that numbers could grow 500 times by the summer. The swarms are a consequence of climate change; unusually wet weather created perfect conditions for the new swarms to mature and lay eggs. The eggs hatch into hopper bands during May and form new swarms in late June and July, which coincides with what is normally the start of the harvest. Illustrating the link between conflict and challenging environmental conditions, the war in Yemen may also have played a role; violence in Yemen constrained the ability of local authorities to control the first swarms before they crossed over into the Horn of Africa.³⁸ The progression of the locust swarms represents an unprecedented threat to food security and livelihoods as it coincides with the beginning of the long rains and the planting season. The invasion is worsening food shortages in a region where up to 25 million people are suffering from three consecutive years of droughts and floods. FAO reported that a 1 km² locust swarm could eat approximately the same amount of food in one day as 35,000 people,³⁹ an alarming fact given the region's pre-existing food insecurity. Further destruction of harvests by locusts will likely lead to an even more severe risk of widespread famine.

East African communities, including those in South Sudan, have not been confronted with such large invasions for at least a quarter of a century. Governments in the region now find themselves scrambling for pesticides, protective clothing, fumigators, and aircraft to fly above the locust swarms and spray them dead. Compounding the locust emergency, the coronavirus pandemic has prompted the grounding of most flights, and cargo supply chains have become more expensive and less reliable. Beyond the direct impact of reduced food production and destroyed crops for entire communities in eastern Africa,⁴⁰ communities were forced to find new lands and sources of income and food elsewhere. These movements of populations in search of cultivable land and food may reignite tensions and inter-communal clashes among pastoralist communities, and between pastoralists and farmers, in the affected countries. Due to compounding shocks, both in areas of displacement and return, populations have been repeatedly forced to flee their homes and seek safer, more livable circumstances elsewhere. Conditions of protracted and recurrent displacement continue to impact pre-existing vulnerabilities and coping capacities of the affected populations, with women and girls being impacted both differentially and disproportionately.

Massive Displacement

³⁷ "South Sudan Hit by Desert Locust Swarm as Plague Spreads," *Al Jazeera*, February 19, 2020, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/19/south-sudan-hit-by-desert-locust-swarm-as-plague-spreads>.

³⁸ "Battle 'Not Yet Over' Against Locust Invasions in East Africa and Yemen," *UN News*, May 11, 2020, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1063672>.

³⁹ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, *Desert Locust Crisis: Appeal for Rapid Response and Anticipatory Action in the Greater Horn of Africa: January–December 2020* (Nairobi: FAO, 2020), 3, March 17, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Desert%20Locust%20Crisis%20-%20Appeal%20for%20rapid%20response%20and%20anticipatory%20action%20in%20the%20Greater%20Horn%20of%20Africa%20January%20-%20December%202020%20.pdf>.

⁴⁰ "Somaliland Farmers Lose Everything to New Plague of Locusts," *Radio Ergo*, May 6, 2020, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://radioergo.org/en/2020/05/06/somaliland-farmers-lose-everything-to-new-plague-of-locusts/>.

Complex emergencies resulting from the convergence of climate disasters and mass violence, like that experienced in South Sudan, can drive displacement in a number of ways. When severe climate conditions strike regions already experiencing civil unrest, the combined pressures on the population can both intensify violence and lead to greater displacement. This kind of cycle between displacement and mass violence can be self-perpetuating. Environmental extremes can also contribute to, or exacerbate, conflict when the resulting water and food insecurity fuels political instability, leading to outbreaks of violence among local communities. Similarly, climate change feeds into the environment-conflict nexus as a “threat multiplier,” intensifying competition for already scarce resources, including food, water, energy, and even habitable land.

The many causes of displacement make for complex dynamics that frequently overlap. This has all been the case in South Sudan where some of the main drivers are the civil war that began in 2013, inter-communal violence and recurrent natural hazards such as floods and drought. Over 1 million South Sudanese refugees have been displaced into neighboring Uganda in the largest mass exodus on the continent since the 1994 Rwandan genocide, and the third largest in the world after Syria and Afghanistan. Close to 2 million civilians are internally displaced within South Sudan, over 200,000 of whom are currently living on UN bases under the protection of the peacekeeping mission. The number of South Sudanese refugees currently stands at over 2.2 million people,⁴¹ while an estimated 1.5 million were internally displaced in 2019.⁴² Almost 259,000 new conflict displacements were recorded in 2019. Floods triggered about 294,000 new displacements that year. In the first half of 2020, there were 232,000 new displacements associated with conflict and violence, and 23,000 from climate disasters.⁴³ Additionally, a significant but less often discussed source of displacement are cattle raids and the persistent attacks on civilians by armed cattle keepers. Cattle raids involve not just cattle theft but also looting and destruction of housing and property, and often involve multiple forms of violence against civilians, including killing, injury, abduction, and rape.

Figures from the UN Refugee Agency’s *Regional Refugee Response Plan (Regional RRP) for South Sudan, 2020–2021* indicate that, while an estimated 200,000 South Sudanese refugees were reported to have returned spontaneously since 2017, these returns have not been sustainable and led to a majority living in IDP-like situations; that is, conditions of internal displacement. Ongoing protracted displacement of South Sudanese refugees is expected to exert further pressure on the already limited economic resources of the host countries.⁴⁴

While records are rarely disaggregated by gender or age, the UN Refugee Agency estimates that 83 percent of the overall South Sudanese refugee population are comprised of women and children.⁴⁵ Often characterized as groups with “special needs,” women and girls are susceptible to multiple protection risks, including lack of basic services, food insecurity, and different forms of violence including beatings, rape and gang rape, sexual assault, and forced labor, as discussed in the previous section. Displacement and the resulting changes in living circumstances—whether in a refugee settlement, a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs), a protection of civilians (PoC) site, or a host community within or across national borders—have forced South Sudanese women and girls to cope with new environments and changing social

⁴¹ “Regional Overview of the South Sudanese Refugee Population: South Sudan Regional RRP,” *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Operational Data Portal*, March 31, 2020, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/62?sv=5&geo=0>.

⁴² “New Research Finds 1.5 million Internally Displaced Persons in South Sudan,” *UN OCHA*, October 10, 2019, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.unocha.org/story/new-research-finds-15-million-internally-displaced-persons-south-sudan>.

⁴³ “Country Profile: South Sudan,” *Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) (website, n.d.)*, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/south-sudan>.

⁴⁴ UNHCR, *South Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan January 2020–December 2021*, (UNHCR Regional Bureau for East and Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes, November 2018), 7, accessed March 12, 2021. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/South%20Sudan%20Regional%20Refugee%20Response%20Plan%20-%20March%202021.pdf>.

⁴⁵ UNHCR, *Regional Overview*. First mentioned in note 39.

structures. Even when sheltered within structures specifically established to offer refuge to displaced populations such as settlements and camps, women's and girls' protection concerns are seldom fully resolved as violence against them, including SGBV, remains a constant threat, perpetrated by aggressors from within and outside the camp who act in an environment of impunity. In a country where four in five people endure extreme poverty, and 70% need humanitarian assistance, women and girls are shouldering disproportionate responsibility as caregivers, breadwinners, and protectors for families and communities that have been ravaged by conflict, submerged by floods, attacked by locusts, weakened by famine, and repeatedly driven into forced displacement.

Responses to the Crises through a Gender Lens

Against the backdrop of the major environmental and social changes sweeping the country, there has been notable progress related to South Sudanese women's participation in public life. During the previous war, many women took on community responsibilities and leadership roles traditionally assigned to males. Nominated as community chiefs, some of these women were in charge of food distribution and provision of services for orphans, widows, and other potentially vulnerable groups. Women in exile—for example, those living in refugee camps and settlements—became particularly active and organized themselves across ethnic groups working towards the return of peace.⁴⁶ My research among displaced women and girls indicates that they developed a more flexible outlook on job acceptability than those who stayed behind. Brewing and selling beer, and occupations that involve interacting with non-kin males—for example, waitressing in restaurants and bars, considered disreputable by local standards—are mainly undertaken by displaced women.⁴⁷

As part of my larger study of the gender-environment-security nexus in South Sudan, I have also had the opportunity to speak with female South Sudanese survivors of SGBV both in South Sudan and in several diaspora countries, including Egypt, Uganda, the UK, and the US. Most recently, in the late summer of 2019, I visited a rehabilitation project in Ganyliel, a town on the banks of the Nile River in South Sudan's Unity State. Accessible only by plane or boat, and sheltered by marshes which form natural defenses in the center of the country, Ganyliel was spared the worst of the war. The women in this program, known as "Beam of Hope," are overcoming the physical and psychological trauma of the SGBV they endured through counseling, mutual support, and assistance with various livelihood schemes. Although fishing is traditionally considered a male activity, women in Ganyliel can be seen navigating the town's waterways in tree-carved boats and selling their catch in the town's market. In doing so, they support themselves and their households, and contribute to the food security of a region that has often had to rely on food distributions by the UN's World Food Program.

Women members of civil society have demanded a broadening of the political agenda to include protection, education, health, and attention to environmental issues, especially as they impact livelihood provision. Female civil society leaders acted as official observers in the 2018 peace process; women comprised 25 percent of the delegates, while one woman served as a mediator. Women also constitute the majority of breadwinners in the country, as 58 percent of South Sudanese households are female-headed. That percentage reaches up to 80 percent among displaced households.⁴⁸

In the face of the severity of the violence women engaged in a range of strategies to prevent mass atrocities and mitigate their escalation. Nyathon Hoth Mai, a researcher and

⁴⁶ Katarzyna Grabska, *Gender, Home & Identity: Nuer Repatriation to Southern Sudan* (Suffolk: Currey, 2014), 59.

⁴⁷ Marisa O. Ensor, "Youth Culture, Refugee (Re)integration, and Diasporic Identities in South Sudan," *Postcolonial Text* 8, no. 3 (2013), 11; Marisa O. Ensor, *Displaced Youth's Role in Sustainable Return: Lessons from South Sudan* (Geneva: IOM, March 2013), 42, accessed June 26, 2022, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mrs_47_6nov.pdf.

⁴⁸ Elysia Buchanan, *No Simple Solutions: Women, Displacement and Durable Solutions in South Sudan* (Nairobi: Oxfam International, 2019), 7, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620857/bp-no-simple-solutions-women-displacement-south-sudan-030919-en.pdf>.

lecturer at the University of Juba, describes South Sudanese women's roles in atrocity prevention as follows:

Women's organizations framed the conflict as a conflict between men, rather than as an ethnic conflict or a conflict between women, in an effort to present women as one tribe. The Women Monthly Forum invited the Bentiu Women Network from Nuer, for example, to call for dialogue and the prevention of atrocities. Women also travelled to the United States to appeal to Madame Angelina, the wife of [South Sudanese Vice President and, at the time, Rebel Leader] Reik Machar, to use her influence to convince him to end the conflict. On the ground, women's block organizations distributed food, water, and clothing to the wounded in hospitals.⁴⁹

Legal restrictions, and the threat of harassment by South Sudanese security forces, placed considerable constraints on civilian women's and men's ability respond to acts of mass violence. In some circumstances, violence persisted despite civilian actions; in others, women-led efforts successfully mitigated risks and discouraged violence. Significantly, a women's delegation met with UN Security Council members during their October 2019 visit to Juba to demand the establishment of the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS). The HCSS is intended to bring perpetrators to justice and reduce impunity for war crimes, including those committed against women and girls, as required by the peace agreement (R-ARCSS) signed in 2018. Chapter five of the R-ARCSS requires the transitional government to form the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing, the Hybrid Court for South Sudan, and a compensation and reparation authority. In January 2021, South Sudan's government finally gave approval to establish accountability mechanisms to address the country's conflict, including a war crimes court in partnership with the African Union (AU).⁵⁰ Provided that concrete action is taken to operationalize these mechanisms, this could represent an important step to reduce impunity and bring a measure of justice to victims and survivors.

Also noteworthy is South Sudan National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security, originally launched in 2015. Supported by UN WOMEN, this NAP was developed through a consultation of various peace and security stakeholders. The process was led by the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare (MGCSW), with the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) as the co-chair. According to PeaceWomen, a New York-based organization with a particular focus on the Women, Peace and Security agenda, the "National Steering Committee comprised of government ministries, commissions, United Nations agencies and civil society organizations, coordinates and monitors the South Sudan National Action Plan implementation, ... and is intended to ensure that the National Action Plan is aligned with the Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan, 2011, the South Sudan Development Plan, 2011–2013, and all other existing laws and policies."⁵¹

It must however be born in mind that the elimination of gender-based legal discrimination only constitutes a first step. To effect a meaningful impact on women's lives,

⁴⁹ Nyathon H. Mai, *The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Preventing Mass Atrocities in South Sudan: The Cases of the SPLM Leadership Crisis (2013), the Military Standoff at General Malong's House (2017), and the Wau Crisis (2016–17)* (Washington DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum [USHMM], July 2020), 11, accessed June 29, 2022, <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/StrategicPeacebuilding.pdf>.

⁵⁰ "South Sudan: UN Rights Commission Welcomes 'First Steps' Towards Transitional Justice Institutions," *UN News*, February 1, 2021, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1083492>.

⁵¹ Republic of South Sudan, *South Sudan National Action Plan 2015–2020 on UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and Related Resolutions*, 2015, 10, accessed March 20, 2021, <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/SS-NAP-1325.pdf>.

legal frameworks must be supported by gender-sensitive public institutions and concrete, effective action on the ground to ensure the sustainability of gender equality policies. Women and girls face greater burdens from the impacts of climate change, environmental shocks and stresses, and food insecurity, given the subordinated position they occupy in South Sudanese society. This profoundly subordinated status and the pervasively patriarchal gender norms that regulate social life are inconsistent with the progressive stance expressed in South Sudan's normative frameworks. The persistently high levels of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) discussed in earlier sections are also a manifestation of patriarchal attitudes.

The current peacebuilding phase in South Sudan nonetheless offers significant opportunities for advancing gender equality, mainstreaming women's perspectives in peacebuilding, and fostering their budding efforts in environmental stewardship. In recent years, South Sudanese women have made significant strides in their push for inclusion in national peace processes. Women negotiators were crucial in shaping the 2018 peace agreement—"revitalizing" what had been a stalled and contentious process—and in securing a new quota that requires 35 percent of government representatives to be women, opening the door for a more expansive role in national affairs.⁵²

Looking Ahead

As climate change intensifies and extreme weather events wreak havoc on communities, human populations are becoming increasingly mobile. According to some estimates, events linked to climate change—including extreme drought and desertification, wildfires, severe flooding, sea-level rise, agricultural losses, food and water insecurity—are expected to forcibly displace between 50 and 200 million people worldwide by 2050.⁵³ Risk-informed development strategies and policies have the potential to reduce vulnerability and enhance the ability of individuals and communities to cope with, respond to, and acquire the necessary skills to deal with shocks and stressors, including those posed by the combination of climate change and mass violence.

Displaced women and girls require tailored support and protection to ensure their safety and ability to exercise their rights. The normative framework relevant to their situation is fairly comprehensive, but implementation lags far behind in many countries. Better data and analysis can help to improve policies and programs aimed at providing displaced females with the right resources to meet their specific needs. Gender-disaggregated data and analysis, and targeted policies and programs backed by sufficient funds are needed to better address the impacts of conflict, environmental crises and displacement on women's and girls' lives.

As the previous discussion has illustrated, South Sudan has been at the epicenter of an array of destructive dynamics almost since its independence from Sudan in 2011. The country faces multiple socio-economic, political, and environmental challenges, as it exhibits one of the highest compound fragility-climate risks globally. Forced displacement has been a common response to these challenging environmental and security conditions, with women and girls comprising a large proportion of South Sudan's refugee population.⁵⁴ They are often more likely to flee in the face of conflict, violence, disasters, and climate change, and are therefore at greater risk of displacement. In turn, displacement reinforces pre-existing discrimination and socioeconomic disadvantages. Women often face greater challenges than men in securing a decent livelihood in displacement, with repercussions on their ability to find shelter and security, and to access education and healthcare. Undaunted, South Sudanese women have persisted on making their voices heard, even though traditional gender norms have often restricted them from doing so. Their determination to participate in decisions on matters that

⁵² South Sudan Women's Coalition, "Implementation of the 35% Provision: Revitalized Agreement on The Resolution of The Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS)," *United Nations Development Programme* (UNDP), June 1, 2020, accessed June 30, 2022, <https://www.undp.org/south-sudan/publications/implementation-35-provision-r-arcss-gender-matrix-april-2020>.

⁵³ Oli Brown, *Migration and Climate Change* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2008), 11, accessed June 29, 2022, <https://olibrown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2008-Migration-and-Climate-Change-IOM.pdf>.

⁵⁴ UNHCR, *Regional Overview*. First mentioned in note 39.

affect them must be encouraged. The limited but noteworthy progress they have made against all odds must not be allowed to be reversed.

By understanding the cascading nature of the impacts of climate change on ethnically divided, fragile, and conflict-prone countries, decision makers will be better able to plan, adapt and manage risks. Lessons from South Sudan can, by qualified extension, guide efforts to advance and sustain peace and security in other contexts and inform responses to the challenges posed by climate change and deteriorating environmental conditions. South Sudan's transformation from conflict to recovery is underway, but much needs to be done to secure a peaceful and prosperous future for all. The overall security, rule of law, and human and women's rights situation in South Sudan remains highly volatile and implementation of the R-ARCSS lags, in particular the foreseen cantonment and disarmament of armed groups. Unless the country's political and civil society leaders, including the members of women's groups, make a concerted effort to implement the transitional and peace processes, South Sudan will remain highly fragile and unprepared for future climate shocks. During this critical time when humanity faces a potentially existential threat in the combined destructive forces of violent conflict and climate change, women and girls in South Sudan and across the globe, must, with their male counterparts, be at the forefront of a worldwide response that is sensitive to local contexts.

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