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CONNECTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND  
STRATEGIES FOR LEADERSHIP

Nicki Kindersley and Alex Miskin



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MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK

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## THE AUTHORS

**Nicki Kindersley** is lecturer in African history at Cardiff University and a Fellow of the Rift Valley Institute. She is a contemporary historian of labour and migration in South Sudan and its borderlands.

**Alex Miskin** worked with the Rift Valley Institute as a Project Coordinator until August 2023. He is a researcher and a project administrator with experience in archives management, outreach programming, teaching and the application of archival and oral history research methods. Alex studied Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of Juba, South Sudan.

## RESEARCH TEAM

Research was conducted in Bor, Wau and Torit by the following team members:

**Bor:** Elizabeth Abuk Atem and Abraham Diing.

**Wau:** Samuel Cornelio and Angelina Akuol Nyuol.

**Torit:** Ohide Johnson Paul and Anna Adiyo Sebit.

## JUST FUTURE

Just Future is a 5-year programme led by an alliance of international and local NGOs and civil society organizations, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. The programme seeks to empower CSOs operating within fragile contexts to advocate for more accessible, responsive and accountable security and justice institutions, and more inclusive political governance and peace-making, from the local and national level, to the regional and international arena.

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## COVER PHOTO

A woman holds a South Sudanese flag at a Stand Up For Peace concert organized by UNMISS in collaboration with South Sudanese state authorities in Aweil, Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, on 13 August 2022. Credit: Ragnhild Gylver.

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# SUMMARY

- Across South Sudan, women of different socio-economic backgrounds and experiences are fighting to take up positions of authority at all levels. This process is uneven, non-linear, and socially complex.
- The ways in which women are organizing for leadership and authority are linked between different parts of the country: from urban to rural spaces, across counties and states, and across social classes, from the neighbourhood water pump to national peace negotiations.
- Women working in urban neighbourhoods have made significant steps forward in organizing and gaining positions of authority over the last decade. These shifts are, however, not always accompanied by real shifts in power and equality.
- Women are significantly engaged in peace negotiations and mediation, especially in rural areas where they are active in the many local peace processes built over the last five years. Despite their involvement, their roles are often hidden. Moreover, their methods and representation are not reflected at state or national-level peace negotiations.
- There are fundamental economic and social barriers to women taking up authority. These include significant workloads at home and work, limitations of education and time, and the risks of social stigma and confrontation with the authority of male family members. These barriers are particularly acute for working-class, rural, displaced and disabled women but also act to block the abilities of educated and middle-class women to assert their authority.
- Property rights are a key barrier to women's leadership. In both rural and urban areas, most women do not have the rights in practice to hold significant intergenerational wealth, especially in land and cattle, nor (therefore) to make decisions about this wealth. This fundamentally affects the abilities of these women to make decisions both within their family and in wider society about marriage, divorce, domestic and sexual violence, child custody and inheritance.
- The impact of nearly a decade of the political instrumentalization of ethnic difference in politics and conflicts at local and national levels is highlighted as a barrier to collective action. Women are not just divided by social and economic class, location, education, disability, age and experience, but also by anger, fear and prejudice as a result of nearly a decade of violent politics. They are further divided by different ideas and views of women's priorities and strategies for leadership going forward into the future.
- The research highlights programmatic, administrative, and funding priorities for supporting women's leadership work. Programme planning should provide for time

and space to meet and develop leadership strategy and pressure campaigns across political and economic sectors. Basic material support is needed for infrastructure and tools, like bicycles, phones and community spaces, not just for organizational capacity but for respect and visibility.

- During research, women suggested more radical shifts in programming: for example, moving urban meetings and urban programmes to rural locations, and supporting boycotts of meetings or peace negotiations where there is insufficient or no women's representation.
- Administrative and funding systems must work to support women's efforts to gain and keep leadership power. Recommendations include: positive discrimination in development programme hiring; bias-challenging training with male staff, as well as robust processes for reporting and addressing sexual misconduct and misogyny; and funding sustained, long-term support for women's economic and civil society organizing.

# INTRODUCTION

Women's positions in the South Sudanese economy, society, political sphere, urban and rural spaces, and workplaces have evolved rapidly alongside renewed conflict since 2013 and widespread economic collapse. Women's fights for leadership and systemic change are long term and contingent on wider economic and political dynamics and social systems. This report explores these dynamics and strategies through a recent history of changes in women's authority and leadership in the Torit, Wau and Bor areas in South Sudan over the last ten years.

The research upon which this report is based looks specifically at women's access to authority in systems of local justice and community governance. Often termed 'traditional' or 'customary authority', these systems are diverse across South Sudan, ranging from generational age-set leadership among both men and women, cattle camp and clan leadership, to hierarchies of chiefs, the majority of whom are men. Chiefs have a specific history in South Sudan as they were given both local administrative and judicial authority by the colonial government in the 1930s. Since then, chiefs have acted as both community representatives and local government authorities, including for the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) during the Second Sudanese Civil War from 1983–2005. At present, they act as the lowest level of the hybrid justice system in South Sudan. All forms of these customary authorities are looked to for their significant intermediary position in peacebuilding.<sup>1</sup> As such, the common lack of women in positions of customary authority across South Sudan is a key governance and justice issue.<sup>2</sup>

Since the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement ended the Second Sudanese Civil War, there have been extensive investments in building women's leadership by South Sudanese women of all backgrounds and socio-economic class. A plethora of national and international development agencies, donors and UN bodies have also contributed to these efforts. These many generations of projects and programmes have suffered from repeated interruptions of

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- 1 Cherry Leonardi, 'Making Order Out of Disorder: Customary Authority in South Sudan', South Sudan Customary Authorities Project, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2019. Accessed 17 April 2023, <https://riftvalley.net/sites/default/files/publication-documents/Making%20Order%20Out%20of%20Disorder%20by%20Cherry%20Leonardi%20-%20RVIS%20SSCA%20Project%20%282019%29.pdf>.
  - 2 Rachel Ibreck and Naomi Pendle, 'Customary Protection? Chiefs' Courts as Public Authority in UN Protection of Civilian Sites in South Sudan', JSRP Paper 34, London: Justice and Security Research Programme, International Development Department, London School of Economics, September 2016. Accessed 17 April 2023, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/84472/1/JSRP-34.Ibreck.Pendle.pdf>; Rachel Ibreck, Hannah Logan and Naomi Pendle, 'Negotiating Justice: Courts as Local Civil Authority during the Conflict in South Sudan', London: London School of Economics, 2017. Accessed 17 April 2023, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/84470/1/17-0048-Sudan-Report-v9.Web.pdf>; Cherry Leonardi et al., 'Local Justice in Southern Sudan', Peaceworks, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 24 September 2010; Jane Kani Edward, 'Reconfiguring the South Sudanese Women's Movement', *Hawwa* 17/1 (2019).

funding and programming shifts, and the loss of institutional memory among the changing staff of supporting partners. To bridge some of these gaps, this report takes a contemporary historical approach: tracing the slow and long-term work for change by South Sudanese women working through conflicts and crises.

This work for change is holistic. Women across the research sites emphasize how advances in women's representation and authority are connected across local and national government, the private sector, customary authority, and the NGO and development sector, in both urban and rural spaces. In this common view, building women's access and authority in one area supports arguments for rights and access in others. This report evidences how educational investments and locally specific lobbying, changing urban economic conditions for some women, and shifting economic and justice pressures have impacted women's ability to gain leadership and authority across local government and justice systems over the last decade.

Focused on understanding this shifting topography of gendered power, the research for this report aims to:

- Understand how and where women are gaining leadership and decision-making abilities in local justice, community governance and peacebuilding spaces
- Explore how women are building these emerging roles in different situations and under different structural economic and societal pressures, at home and in public
- Survey perceptions of women's authority not only among men but between women in different class, social, educational and locational positions, including displaced, migrant and disabled women
- Explore avenues for advancing women's inclusion in decision-making and peace processes from the local to the international level

The project seeks to understand where women are gaining only nominal powers and titles, and where they are gaining practical powers to act and lead. It also aims to understand what women do with different kinds of authority at neighbourhood, community and regional levels. Women are not a class with shared interests but a heterogeneous collective with diverse ideas of leadership, rights, empowerment and strategy. The research highlights key competing ideas of women's empowerment in local authority and peace processes, and tensions over pathways forward for women's leadership.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: SOUTH SUDANESE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP**

In discussions of peacebuilding and leadership, women are often grouped together as a constituency; for example, alongside youth and internally displaced persons (IDPs). This is despite obvious heterogeneity and differences of experience and opinion based on class and income, age, social status, education, employment, political and ethnic identifications and belonging, religion, experiences of displacement and resettlement, and other differences such



as disability, health and mental health.<sup>3</sup> This report highlights key intersections of economic class, social and ethnic systems, age and location, among other differences of positionality and power.

Approaching the existing research literature on South Sudanese women's experience via this intersectional lens is informative. Research that focuses on the vast majority of working-class (poor) women, especially in rural areas and conflict zones, is often concerned with documenting and challenging extreme deprivation, violence and social harms. In conflict zones over the last five years, research finds that up to 65 per cent of women and girls have suffered physical or sexual violence, and women and children make up the majority of those displaced by conflict, famine and flooding since 2013.<sup>4</sup>

Research and programming on women's access to healthcare and education reflects fundamental barriers across the country. The average literacy rate of women in South Sudan is around 19 per cent, compared to the national average of 27 per cent, with girls less likely to access school education and more likely to leave education, although education and healthcare access increases significantly in urban centres and for women from middle and upper-class families.<sup>5</sup> Regions that have seen significantly less active conflict (for example, Northern Bahr el-Ghazal) present different barriers to women's access to healthcare and education than areas where infrastructure and funding have been devastated by repeated conflicts (for example, Jonglei, Upper Nile and Lakes). The chronic economic crisis in South Sudan since 2013 has put extensive pressure on women's labour and social reproductive value via bridewealth systems, including women from both working-class backgrounds and the small educated upper class.<sup>6</sup>

Research on women's access to peace processes and negotiations is most often focused on the work of educated and formally employed women in the NNGO (national NGO), NGO and central government sectors. This research highlights similar cross-cutting structural barriers of sexual assault, marginalization and intimidation. Women in government leadership positions at county, state and national levels are often referred to by male colleagues as 'cosmetic' or

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3 Edward, 'Reconfiguring', 59.

4 Namalie Jayasinghe, Momotaz Khatun and Moses Okwii, 'Women Leading Locally: Exploring Women's Leadership in Humanitarian Action in Bangladesh and South Sudan', Oxfam Research Reports, Nairobi: Oxfam, January 2020 39. Accessed 17 April 2023, <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620937/rr-women-leading-locally-humanitarian-290120-en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>. Programmes that focus on gendered support for women and girls in crisis, displacement and education access often inadvertently re-emphasize women's vulnerability to violence and their needs for care. See: Ishmael I Munene and Pascal Wambiya, 'Bridging the Gender Gap through Gender Difference: Aiding Patriarchy in South Sudan Education Reconstruction', *Africa Education Review* 16/5 (2019): 98.

5 Jayasinghe, Khatun and Okwii, 'Women Leading Locally', 39.

6 Alicia Luedke, 'Violence, Crime and Gender in South Sudan', London: Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics, 2020, 27,22. Accessed 17 April 2023, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/107520/1/CRP\\_violence\\_crime\\_and\\_gender\\_in\\_south\\_sudan.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/107520/1/CRP_violence_crime_and_gender_in_south_sudan.pdf); Munene and Wambiya, 'Bridging the Gender Gap', 98.

'token', and report being restricted in their abilities to act.<sup>7</sup> Many women also report being overlooked, intimidated and routinely disrespected.<sup>8</sup> Sexual harassment is even reported during the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) peace negotiations.<sup>9</sup> Political representation does not necessarily translate to influence or power.<sup>10</sup> Policies, budgets and programmes are often mostly or wholly set by men both in government, and in the development and humanitarian sectors.<sup>11</sup>

Shifting these diverse but systemic marginalizations and widespread harms is particularly difficult. Many South Sudanese and international actors have pursued two main routes: education-based approaches and legislative change. Neither top-down legislation nor cross-class investments in access to education have significantly shifted gender inequalities or transferred rights in practice.<sup>12</sup> For example, in early 2013 the South Sudan government increased the percentage of government posts required to be held by women from 25 per cent to 35 per cent, despite the fact that the original allocation was not being met at multiple levels of government; women still do not hold this lower-level quota.<sup>13</sup>

## WOMEN IN PEACEBUILDING

Many researchers note how few women have been able to participate in major peace negotiations since the 1990s.<sup>14</sup> There was some improvement in the number of women delegates to the 2014–2015 negotiations and the 2017 ceasefire negotiations but representation once again

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- 7 Edward, 'Reconfiguring', 72; Augustino T Mayai, 'Improving Gender Equality Quota Implementation in Post-Conflict South Sudan', Juba: The Sudd Institute, 6 November 2018, 5,3.
  - 8 Tolulope Jolaade Adeogun and Janet Muthoni Muthuki, 'Feminist perspectives on peacebuilding: The case of women's organisations in South Sudan', *Agenda* 32/2 (2018): 88.
  - 9 Jayasinghe, Khatun and Okwii, 'Women Leading Locally', 46; Sarah Pelham, 'Born to Lead: Recommendations on Increasing Women's Participation in South Sudan's Peace Processes', Oxford: Oxfam GB, 30 January 2020, 13. Accessed 17 April 2023, <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620934/bp-south-sudan-women-peace-processes-300120-en.pdf>.
  - 10 Liezelle Kumalo and Cassie Roddy-Mullineaux, 'Sustaining Peace: Harnessing the Power of South Sudanese Women', Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, November 2019, 16, 4. Accessed 4 May 2021, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/ear-30.pdf>; Edward, 'Reconfiguring', 73.2019
  - 11 Munene and Wambiya, 'Bridging the Gender Gap', 98.
  - 12 Kumalo and Roddy-Mullineaux, 'Sustaining Peace', 2. For discussions of the wide body of research on access to justice and rights programming in South Sudan, see: Rens Willems and David K Deng, 'Access to Justice in South Sudan', Policy Brief, Intersections of Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation in South Sudan, Den Haag: The Dutch Research Council (NWO), May 2016. Accessed 17 April 2023, <https://www.upeace.nl/cp/uploads/downloadprojecten/Access-to-Justice-in-South-Sudan---Policy-Brief.pdf>. For assumptions related to education-based approaches, see: Luedke, 'Violence, Crime and Gender', 22.
  - 13 Edward, 'Reconfiguring', 73.
  - 14 Helen Kezie-Nwoha and Juliet Were, 'Women's informal peace efforts: Grassroots activism in South Sudan', CMI Brief no. 2018:07. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2018, 2. Accessed 4 May 2021, <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6700-womens-informal-peace-efforts>; Kumalo and Roddy-Mullineaux, 'Sustaining Peace', 6–7.

did not always translate to significant influence.<sup>15</sup> These comparatively small numbers and corresponding lack of influence can be seen as a statistical ‘canary in a coal mine’: a sign of much deeper exclusions and inequities being built into peace agreements.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, there is a long history of extensive women’s organizing for local and regional peacebuilding, and for women-focused social services, support and empowerment.<sup>17</sup> Women’s associations and forums have been central in supporting both women and the survival of communities, organizations and reconciliation efforts since the 1970s. Many organizations and women organizers started their work during the Sudanese civil war (1983–2005) in refugee camps, churches and NGOs, both inside SPLA liberated territories and across Sudan and east Africa.<sup>18</sup> Despite this, women’s organizations are still significantly underrepresented in South Sudanese NGO spaces and funding allocations.<sup>19</sup>

Many women across urban, rural and displaced spaces have organized peace meetings and facilitated grassroots peace agreements and long-running dialogues between communities, and worked to disseminate and uphold principles decided in these fora.<sup>20</sup> Just as importantly, local women’s groups and organizations commonly do the fundamental background work to facilitate peacebuilding meetings and conferences more generally; for instance, cooking, bringing water, and organizing rituals and songs to cement accords and reconciliation.<sup>21</sup>

This research therefore takes a wide holistic approach to understanding women’s organizing for authority and leadership in peacebuilding. It consults both working-class and middle-class women on their strategies and challenges, and explores the interconnected work women are doing between urban and rural spaces, in state, customary, development–humanitarian and business roles. Because the literature on challenges to women’s access to peace negotiations is often focused on national-level mediation and disconnected from wider research on women’s leadership and authority, this research also seeks to build a more connected understanding of women’s work in peacebuilding— from the neighbourhood level up to the national level.

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- 15 Kumalo and Roddy-Mullineaux, ‘Sustaining Peace’, 8; Pelham, ‘Born to Lead’, 7.
  - 16 Jasmin-Kim Westendorf, ‘Peace negotiations in the political marketplace: the implications of women’s exclusion in the Sudan–South Sudan peace process’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 72/5 (2018).
  - 17 Kumalo and Roddy-Mullineaux, ‘Sustaining Peace’, 7.
  - 18 Edward, ‘Reconfiguring’, 66; Ester Soma, ‘Our Search for Peace: Women in South Sudan’s National Peace Processes, 2005–2018’, Nairobi: Oxfam International, 30 January 2020. Accessed 17 April 2023, <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620930/rr-women-south-sudan-peace-processes-300120-en.pdf>.
  - 19 Jayasinghe, Khatun and Okwii, ‘Women Leading Locally’, 47.
  - 20 For examples, see Jayasinghe, Khatun and Okwii, ‘Women Leading Locally’, 44.
  - 21 Winnie Bedigen, ‘*Honyomiji*: the local women’s peacebuilding institution in South Sudan’, *Peacebuilding* 9/4 (2021): 18.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research project focuses on three case study areas for comparative analysis and to capture a variety of recent dynamics of insecurity, displacement and return settlement. The three research sites include rural and urban areas around Torit, Wau and Bor. They further reflect the diversity of ethnic and clan identifications and ethnicized conflict dynamics in South Sudan in recent years, with all three areas experiencing forms of intra-clan and farmer–pastoralist conflict. Some sites include inter-ethnic and national conflict arenas in both urban and rural spaces (Wau, Bor).

**TABLE 1: Demographic and livelihoods profile in Bor, Torit and Wau**

BOR TOWN AND SURROUNDING COUNTY	TORIT TOWN AND SURROUNDING COUNTY	WAU TOWN AND SURROUNDING COUNTY
Approximately 30,000 IDPs and 50,000 returnees	2,500 IDPs and about 8,000 returnees	Approximately 50,000 IDPs and more than 150,000 returnees
Majority Bor Dinka community	Otuho and Lakoya main communities, with displaced residents in Torit town from across South Sudan  Acholi and Madi communities in the south, towards Magwi county	Balanda, Luo and Dinka communities
Farming, cattle keeping, fishing, and transport. Major market and infrastructure in town. Town was destroyed in violence in December 2013 and reconstructed post-2013.	Farming, cattle keeping and fishing. Torit town is an NGO hub. Large-scale displacement in the county in 2013 and 2016.	Farming and trade. Medical centre in Wau. Military tensions in Wau town from 2013 to date, with long historical precedents.

Source: CSRF County Profiles, <https://www.csrfsouthsudan.org/county-profiles-intro/>

A total of 42 people were interviewed, with an additional 22 people interviewed in focus group discussions. Of these 64 people, 53 are women, including 13 chiefs and sub-chiefs, 7 clan leaders, 2 members of the police or military, and 2 local government staff. Other interviewees are working women engaged in a variety of activities, including volunteer work in church groups and community-based organizations (CBOs). Insofar as possible, the selection of interviewees is a balanced representation between rural and urban locations, between different communities (at ethnic and clan levels), and between class, social, educational and age categories.<sup>22</sup>

Co-designed by all the researchers involved in the study, the methodology builds on an initial

22 A full ethical review of the methodology was undertaken and informed consent sought at all stages. Interviewee names have been anonymized to protect their identities and ensure their safety. Based on additional consent from participants, the oral history interviews documented as part of this research will be donated to the RVI oral history archive, with both online access and access via the National Archive in Juba.

mapping of recent shifts and events in women's leadership and peacebuilding participation, conducted in each site. This provides starting points for key informant interviews, focus group discussions and snowball interviews, with a priority to involve women holding past and current leadership roles and those who participated in peace negotiations from local to national levels, including those who had lost their positions. The interviews were wide ranging and historical, encouraging all women participants to talk about their personal history of leadership and organization. In the later stages of research, the team reviewed the findings and tested further questions via follow-up research in Juba, which also provided opportunities to explore connections and commonalities between research sites and the capital.

The interviews pursue several key directions. First, they explore how women were able to access particular positions of leadership or influence in the last few decades, with a specific focus on these changing dynamics of access in the last five years, with the aim of understanding different women's tactics (successful and otherwise) in negotiating for effective leadership or decision-making powers. Second, the questions explore the forms of power and authority different women were able to access in different places and circumstances, and the limitations placed on these forms of authority and leadership. Third, the interviews explore differences of opinion, tactics, and priorities among women in different economic class, geographical, social and educational positions. This considers local disagreements over ways forward for women's leadership, and what powers women should (or should not) take up and why; differences in priorities for different social classes of women between sites, between rural and urban areas, and between educational and economic classes.

# URBAN CENTRES: GROWING LEADERSHIP, UNCERTAIN AUTHORITY

‘I advise them to learn leadership from the block [neighbourhood], and later extend to the state’.<sup>23</sup>

Significantly more women work as neighbourhood authorities and local leadership in urban spaces than a decade ago. The reasons for this shift are locally specific, and women are capitalizing on these local dynamics.

**TABLE 2:** Urban centres in Bor, Torit and Wau since 2013

BOR TOWN	TORIT TOWN	WAU TOWN
Jonglei State Women’s Union has strong influence in building women’s representation in Bor town.	Torit town blocks have increasing numbers of women leaders (sub-chiefs), partly due to the strength of the women’s group community centre and its strong chairperson. The woman sub-chief is particularly strong in Morwari block.	There are now women deputy chiefs in Wau city (Hai Jebel), Nazareth South and Lokoloko West  Wau court has a woman judge and a woman police officer working together. In the land department, a woman staff member supports gender equity in land access.

Since 2017, more women are now in positions of local leadership, in particular in Torit and Wau. In Torit town, for example, women have been appointed to neighbourhood block leadership positions, the urban version of sub-chiefs, after a spate of criminality over the past few years. The local *monyomiji* (age set) leadership and local government endorsed this move in the wake of failures by local male sub-chiefs to manage the situation.<sup>24</sup> Some blocks now have more

23 Interview with woman neighbourhood block sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022.

24 Interview with woman neighbourhood block sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022.

women sub-chiefs than men.<sup>25</sup> This has led to a combination of women civilian leaders and men leaders with military backgrounds; in Torit town, most sub-chiefs and chiefs are local ex-soldiers because they are locally regarded as trained, with leadership skills and respectful of the community.<sup>26</sup> Asha, the *boma* (smallest local administrative unit) chief in charge of the Greater Morwari neighbourhood block, is a particularly well respected female chief in Torit due to a series of successful local decisions she has made.<sup>27</sup>

In Wau, gains in the numbers of women in positions of local leadership have also been made in customary court systems at urban block and *payam* (second-level administrative unit; below counties) levels, the lowest rung of the South Sudanese judicial system, in part because of coordinated efforts by women at local and senior levels.<sup>28</sup> Wau town and the local *payams* now have women deputy chiefs (Nazareth South, Hai Jebel, and Lokoloko) and two female judges (Wau North *payam* and Wau central court), although they are both bench members rather than chairs of the court.<sup>29</sup> Many of these women, with backgrounds in veterinary care, teaching and business, obtained their leadership positions after significant lobbying.<sup>30</sup> Some women were elected, although the majority were nominated by their neighbourhoods—by elders or local church members.<sup>31</sup>

In Bor there are fewer women leaders in the traditional justice system, although there have been more in past years. The bench court in Bor town has a woman chief on the panel, previously a court clerk but now a businesswoman, who has been a member of the panel since 2014.<sup>32</sup> She works in coordination with both the woman head of the special protection unit of Bor market police station and the woman police officer stationed at the bench court, who is responsible for women in custody.<sup>33</sup> The woman chief frequently asks this police officer to interview a woman (defendant, witness or litigant) and present her evidence on her behalf if she is too frightened to speak for herself in the court.<sup>34</sup> The police officer also organizes bail for pregnant women in

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25 Interview with male chief, Torit town, 17 February 2022.

26 Interview with male sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022.

27 Interview with woman neighbourhood block sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022.

28 Interview with woman police officer, Wau, 23 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Wau, 23 February 2022; interview with women's group leader, Wau, 23 February 2022.

29 Interview with male civil society worker, Wau, February 2022.

30 Interviews with women working in NNGO, local government, health and policing sectors across Wau, February 2022.

31 Interview with woman police officer, Wau, 23 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Wau, 23 February 2022; interview with woman church leader, Wau, 9 March 2022; focus group discussion with eight women, Wau, 28 February 2022.

32 Interview with woman community elder, Marol, 15 February 2022; interview with woman bench court chief, Bor, 18 February 2022.

33 Interview with woman court police officer, Bor, 15 February 2022.

34 Interview with woman bench court chief, Bor, 18 February 2022.

custody, arguing for a relative to stay in custody in her place as ‘the child is innocent’.<sup>35</sup> Female representation on court panels and on the bench of judges is crucial for women’s justice and rights. The leadership positions these women hold in Bor are evidence of long-term struggle and pressure by women working from inside government systems.

In large part, the growing number of urban women in positions of leadership is due to the work of women who have built and continue to build local networks. Women gaining leadership positions act as catalysts across employment sectors. Where women are increasingly employed at or leading NGOs, local government offices and businesses, women are better positioned to be able to organize and lobby for greater decision-making power across the board. This is much easier to do in urban centres, where there are more opportunities for increased independence, financial independence and formal employment.

In each of the three research sites, study findings reveal various centres of women’s organizing power. In Torit, women-led community-based organizations (CBOs) and national NGOs (NNGOs) have been crucial in opening up possibilities for urban-based women as neighbourhood chiefs: in offering training and support; in lobbying for these changes; and by providing earnings so that women can afford to do community service.<sup>36</sup> The women’s group centre in Torit is highly organized and established, and under a respected and powerful chairperson, the centre has been working closely with other local women-led organizations and associations, including the market association.<sup>37</sup> Women now attend town meetings in large numbers, supported by the standard requirement of 35 per cent women’s representation in meetings and training programmes, even if they save their comments for discussion afterwards, as is self-critically noted.<sup>38</sup> Some educated urban women are also working to obtain other key positions of local authority; for example, as head teachers, local ministers and members of parliament, chairpersons of organizations, social workers, public health workers and nurses.<sup>39</sup> Many women in Torit note that it is useful to have a highly visible female paramount chief, who is now the Council of Traditional Authority Leaders (COTAL) chairperson, to point to in arguments for women’s involvement in customary authority.

In Wau town, association space and state employment have been useful in opening up

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35 Interview with woman court police officer, Bor, 15 February 2022.

36 Interview with woman CBO chief executive officer, Torit, 21 February 2022.

37 Interview with male sub-chief, Torit, 19 February 2022; interview with female sub-chief, Torit, 18 February 2022; interview with male chief, Torit, 17 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 22 February 2022; interview with male sub-chief, Fodofodo, 20 February 2022; interview with woman paramount chief, Torit, 21 February 2022.

38 Interview with male sub-chief, Torit, 19 February 2022; interview with male chief, Torit, 17 February 2022; focus group discussion with seven women, Torit, 24 February 2022.

39 Interview with female sub-chief, Torit, 18 February 2022; focus group discussion with seven women, Torit, 24 February 2022; interview with woman paramount chief, Torit, 21 February 2022; interview with woman neighbourhood block sub-chief, Torit, 19 February 2022; interview with male sub-chief, Fodofodo, 20 February 2022; interview with woman NGO director, Torit, 23 February 2022.



opportunities for women’s organizing and leadership building.<sup>40</sup> The *sandouk* (a rotating local savings facility) associations across Wau and the women’s group in Hai Khamsiin are noted as particularly powerful local organizations.<sup>41</sup> Similar to Torit, urban women emphasize the importance of gaining authority across sectors, with many women now working in the military, the ministry of education, churches, health services, and crucially, as a staff member at the land registry.<sup>42</sup> The current governor of Western Bahr el-Ghazal, Sarah Cleto Rial, is an important public figure, whose successes—such as providing electricity in Wau market—are not only of great benefit to local residents but also offer useful arguments for increasing women’s leadership.<sup>43</sup>

As in Torit and Wau, women in Bor town are attempting to gain positions across sectors to build their lobbying capacities. The state ministry of health is now headed by a woman, and there are increasing numbers of female church leaders.<sup>44</sup> Women doctors and nurses help other less educated or socially powerful women present their cases to court, including by providing medical evidence.<sup>45</sup> In Bor, women’s lobbying is now targeted at getting more women into *payam* police services, and the women’s association has written to the state government to ask for greater representation on the town court panel.<sup>46</sup>

A key fight in all the urban research sites is about building safe women-led spaces for women’s organizing and authority. Women across all three research sites note that discussing issues in confidence is tricky when you are working from home.<sup>47</sup> In Bor, the Jonglei State Women’s Association, built by Norwegian People’s Aid and hosting skills training and psycho-social counselling, provides a crucial meeting space.<sup>48</sup> Getting a women’s office built in Pariak is noted as a huge success, particularly as women cannot yet own land there, and organizers are also trying to lobby in Bor for another women’s centre to be built in Makuach.<sup>49</sup> Women organizers

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40 Interview with woman police officer, Wau, 23 February 2022; interview with woman church leader, Wau, 9 March 2022; focus group discussion with eight women, Wau, 28 February 2022.

41 Interview with male civil society worker, Wau, February 2022; interview with women’s group leader, Wau, 23 February 2022; focus group discussion with eight women, Wau, 28 February 2022.

42 Interview with women’s group leader, Wau, 23 February 2022; interview with woman church leader, Wau, 9 March 2022; interview with woman police officer, Wau, 23 February 2022.

43 Interview with woman sub-chief, Wau, 23 February 2022; interview with woman church leader, Wau, 9 March 2022.

44 Interview with woman court police officer, Bor, 15 February 2022; interview with women church leaders, Bor, 17 February 2022.

45 Interview with woman court police officer, Bor, 15 February 2022.

46 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022; interview with woman bench court chief, Bor, 18 February 2022.

47 Interview with male sub-chief, Fodofodo, 20 February 2022.

48 Interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022; interview with woman bench court chief, Bor, 18 February 2022; interview with woman community elder, Marol, 15 February 2022.

49 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022.

are also lobbying to buy chairs for women's organizations in both Bor town and surrounding rural areas, so that they can be seen as authorities on the same level as male-dominated courts and organizations, rather than having to sit on the ground or meet in homes.<sup>50</sup>

Increasing women's leadership in positions of customary authority and leadership at neighbourhood levels is not necessarily evidence of a growing belief in gender equality, however. Some women are gaining official authority at neighbourhood and *payam* levels, as well as in some courts, partly because of their abilities to effectively intervene in domestic disputes and conflicts, often between women. In Torit, women have been appointed as neighbourhood level sub-chiefs by majority male local court committees specifically on the basis of their gendered ability to intervene in domestic disputes and petty criminality.<sup>51</sup> In Torit, these neighbourhood women sub-chiefs mostly work to resolve issues of domestic violence,<sup>52</sup> positioning themselves 'as mothers' in order to intervene.<sup>53</sup> In Torit, Wau and Bor, women neighbourhood leaders and association organizers note that their roles are growing in response to economic and urban social pressures; for example, women intervene in disputes over the use of water points, petty theft, rubbish disposal and domestic violence issues. This form of neighbourhood authority shares strong similarities with (unpaid) social work and counselling.

While women are seeking increased judicial power, they still face considerable limitations and key restrictions on their ability to act and to make judicial decisions. In Torit, for example, at the neighbourhood level, women sub-chiefs are not allowed to oversee cases that the town's highest tier of the legal system, the B court bench, determines are particularly difficult, with the B court then not permitting women litigants and witnesses to speak during hearings, and often resolving cases very differently to how women chiefs want them to go.<sup>54</sup> In Bor, some educated women have become more confident and financially able to take their own cases to the town court. Most of them are, however, often told to return their cases to family elders and clan councils, which are generally unfriendly to women's interests and rights, because the court either sees women's complaints as domestic or community issues, or does not want to expose the woman and her family to public shame via a court hearing.<sup>55</sup>

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50 Interview with woman community leader, Kolnyang, 14 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022.

51 Interview with male sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022.

52 Interview with male chief, Torit town, 17 February 2022.

53 Interview with male chief, Torit town, 17 February 2022.

54 Interview with female sub-chief, Torit town, 18 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit town, 22 February 2022; focus group discussion with seven women, Torit, 24 February 2022; interview with woman NGO director, Torit, 23 February 2022; interview with male CBO programme manager, Torit, 22 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 17 February 2022.

55 Interview with woman community leader and health activist, Taragok, 16 February 2022; interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022; interview with two women community leaders, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022.

Despite these constraints, many urban women believe that the town courts do give hearings that they consider to be fair, which they attribute to the influence of urban women leaders, even though they also know that state courts can overturn lower-level court rulings on key financial issues such as land-related decisions.<sup>56</sup> The courts, which are male-dominated, are also wary of disrupting the status quo and the balance of power; for example, the Bor town court is blocking further women's representation beyond its single woman member, as the male members argue this is enough representation.<sup>57</sup> Taking cases to court as a woman is therefore not a matter of personal confidence. As with their poorer rural counterparts, even educated urban women who are aware of their rights are wary of the potentially devastating personal, financial and social consequences of taking issues, especially domestic issues, to court.

The urban women who are gaining some degree of community and customary authority are frustrated by what is often a purely nominal form of power. Women block leaders in Bor, for example, voice annoyance about a basic lack of powers and respect.<sup>58</sup> Across the three research sites, many women chiefs and sub-chiefs are appointed by local male elders or chiefs and then blocked from participating in court activities, or restricted to very limited cases over domestic disputes. Following a similar trajectory, women's peacebuilding work in Bor town has also recently been undermined. After extensive work by women sub-chiefs in settling a local dispute between youths in different neighbourhoods, for example, the peace agreement was undermined by some community members making fun of the young men, describing them as being 'brought together by women'.<sup>59</sup>

Such realities are rooted in a widespread lack of respect for women's authority. In Torit town, women leaders struggle to get men to attend their meetings and find it difficult to resolve cases between men because of this lack of respect.<sup>60</sup> Women leaders speaking on local radio in Torit are bombarded with hard questions aiming to intimidate them, which has led some to avoid radio interviews.<sup>61</sup> In Wau, a local woman chief appealed to the town mayor for a trade union in Nazareth market but was blocked by male staff, who argued that as a woman she had no business talking to him; however, after the mayor visited the market and created the union, she obtained an apology from the mayor's office.<sup>62</sup>

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56 Interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022.

57 Interview with woman community elder, Marol, 15 February 2022; interview with woman bench court chief, Bor, 18 February 2022.

58 Interviews with women block leaders in Bor, February 2022.

59 Interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022.

60 Interview with male chief, Torit town, 17 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit town, 22 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 17 February 2022; interview with male CBO programme manager, Torit, 22 February 2022; interview with male sub-chief, Fodofodo, 20 February 2022.

61 Interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 17 February 2022.

62 Interview with woman sub-chief, Wau, 23 February 2022.

The participation of both urban and village women in leadership and associational work depends on their economic security. Money is a fundamental barrier to women's ability to spend time and energy on local politics and society.<sup>63</sup> Women need to be able to access and control money to stand for election, along with continuing financial support to take the time off to run for and then take up leadership positions.<sup>64</sup> As a clan chairperson for women notes in a rural area outside Bor, 'Even if you know how to speak, know your rights, without resources you will still fail.'<sup>65</sup> Some women leaders in Torit are described as 'dormant' because they are overwhelmed by domestic and market workloads, or other financial pressures, that limit their time and energy for leadership work.<sup>66</sup>

Educated and professionally employed women face similar pressures to working-class and non-formally educated women. Like their male counterparts, professionally employed women are often under significant financial pressure to support their extended families. Delayed government salaries interrupt regular work and force women to take up multiple jobs; for example, the one woman lawyer who works at the Torit high court is also an NGO employee.<sup>67</sup> Meetings without a small payment to attend, or meetings that take up whole days, are also fundamental barriers to participation for most women, especially those who have multiple economic and domestic commitments.<sup>68</sup>

All of these changing dynamics and pressures are locally specific. They shift depending on the political, economic, and security situations in a given area. In Wau, for example, a more settled security situation has recently allowed women to more easily move about to trade and cultivate, building their businesses, which gives them more time to take up community activism and leadership.<sup>69</sup> In contrast, women in Bor town are under significant pressures because of an influx of rural relatives due to flooding and conflict, which is not only straining their incomes but will also undermine their leadership roles and participation in peace meetings in the near term.<sup>70</sup>

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63 Interview with woman social worker and community elder, Lekyak, 19 February 2022.

64 Interview with woman ministry staff, Wau, February 2022.

65 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022.

66 Interview with woman NGO director, Torit, 23 February 2022.

67 Interview with woman NGO director, Torit, 23 February 2022; focus group discussion with eight women, Wau, 28 February 2022.

68 Focus group discussion with seven women, Torit, 24 February 2022; focus group discussion with eight women, Wau, 28 February 2022.

69 Interview with woman police officer, Wau, 23 February 2022.

70 Interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022.

# RURAL SYSTEMS: CAUTIOUS AND CONSERVATIVE CHANGE

While there is a clear and continuing gap between advances in women’s representation and leadership in both urban spaces and rural areas, women in rural areas face additional pressures. They are key agricultural workers and domestic food producers, and are especially affected by insecurity, climate shocks and market price fluctuations. As one rural woman community leader summarizes, “They are the ones that do everything.”<sup>71</sup> Despite this, common forms and tactics of rural leadership present barriers for women leaders.

For example, in Bor, male chiefs turn themselves in to police custody in order to put an immediate stop to conflicts, which women cannot do because of personal risks, domestic responsibilities and social taboo.<sup>72</sup> Women also do not have the authority to collect compensation or order the collection of cattle for compensation.<sup>73</sup> Across the research sites, rural women also report being widely unable to speak up about abuses and related issues, especially sexual violence. In rural areas around Bor, however, women clan leaders are attempting to negotiate access to court spaces by arguing that there are issues that men cannot deal with alone; for instance, making enquiries about whether a young girl is pregnant in cases of rape or forced marriage.<sup>74</sup> Stigma over adultery and sexual promiscuity also stops many women from speaking up about cases in which other women are accused of adultery, as this would appear to be an admission of personal guilt or lax morality.<sup>75</sup>

Striving to overcome these and other barriers, rural women are making gains, albeit with limited success in some cases. In rural areas in Torit, for example, some women have been able to access government positions at *payam* and *boma* levels in Panyikwara, Owiny-ki-bul and Ikwoto, and in the Anyidi community around Bor, there are now 12 women representing *bomas* and *payams*.<sup>76</sup>

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71 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022.

72 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022.

73 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022.

74 Interview with woman community leader, Kolnyang, 14 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022.

75 Interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022.

76 Interview with woman social worker and community elder, Lekyak, 19 February 2022.

**TABLE 3: Rural areas in Bor, Torit and Wau since 2013**

BOR COUNTY	TORIT COUNTY	WAU COUNTY
Pariak has a women's leader in Chuei Keer, opening up women's leadership in traditional community structures. Makuach area has a history of women chiefs in the past but this is no longer the case as of 2022.	Ikwoto central payam has a woman chief, alongside a woman payam administrator.  Further away from Torit town, the Isohe Women for Peace group, under the Catholic Church, is particularly strong in building women's representation. South, in Magwi county, there is a woman boma chief in Panyikwara and other women chiefs in Owiny-ki-Bul.	Wau North payam court has a woman judge.

In Bor county, women continue to take up long-established forms of leadership within clan structures; however, these roles continue to have a narrow focus on resolving disputes between women, reporting situations of starvation to local authorities and cooking for community meetings, among other duties traditionally undertaken by women.<sup>77</sup> The access of women clan leaders to community decision-making is countered by the argument that women are not formal clan members because they are married into clans, and therefore do not have the required knowledge to take decisions on behalf of the clan.<sup>78</sup>

Over the course of the long-running economic crisis, women have become significant wage earners and breadwinners for their families, especially in situations in which male family members currently find themselves in unpaid government or military employment. While this is a necessity for all women across classes and locations, it is especially the case for women in rural areas, who are also gaining greater economic independence. For these women, this is understood to be a step toward opening up more opportunities for them to take up leadership positions and have their leadership respected. Around Bor, for example, women are increasingly running both the fishing trade at Marol market and the lucrative charcoal business.<sup>79</sup>

As in urban areas, women are crucial mediators in women's disputes, including managing the resettlement of displaced people. In rural areas across the three research sites, key issues include the distribution of food, access to the limited number of water points, and conflicts over

77 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022; interview with woman community elder, Marol, 15 February 2022; interview with woman bench court chief, Bor, 18 February 2022; interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022; interview with woman displaced community leader, Bor, 20 February 2022. This form of leadership was cemented around Bor under the SPLA as women leaders organized food collection for soldiers, according interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022 and interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022.

78 Interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022; interview with woman social worker and community elder, Lekyak, 19 February 2022; interview with woman bench court chief, Bor, 18 February 2022.

79 Interview with woman bench court chief, Bor, 18 February 2022.

rubbish and pollution.<sup>80</sup> When Twic East communities were recently displaced due to flooding, for example, women in Bor were crucial in organizing the emergency response—practicalities related to resettlement and food distribution—until the Mangalla IDP camp could absorb these flood-displaced people.<sup>81</sup> Displaced Twic East women leaders continue to work alongside resident local women leaders to ensure conflicts are prevented or at least minimized.<sup>82</sup> This mediation work is, however, considered less significant than men’s leadership roles, and women in rural Bor are still kept out of discussions and mediation efforts over the drivers of conflicts. In fact, women from all three research sites explain how they are excluded from community decision-making, including key issues related to local peace and security.<sup>83</sup>

Changes in women’s leadership in urban areas are also providing positive pressure points for rural women. Many rural women have heard about women’s leadership, including as chiefs, elsewhere.<sup>84</sup> They have also heard about women amassing significant economic wealth and therefore power. In a rural area outside Bor town, for example, women note that they had heard about women running businesses in Nuer lands, paying school fees for children at Makerere, paying for cows for their own children, and building shops in the market.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to this spreading knowledge, clan and community leaders are in sustained communication across urban and rural spaces, facilitated by women’s associations when they have the funding to do so.<sup>86</sup> Despite rumours of women chiefs being beaten to death over decisions in other locations,<sup>87</sup> this communication and knowledge sharing has helped begin to challenge rural patterns of socialization that emphasize men are the sole leaders and authorities.<sup>88</sup> In some rural areas, women are increasingly referred to as leaders, prompting one woman clan leader to wryly note: ‘This is why you hear men talking negatively about human rights.’<sup>89</sup>

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80 Interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022.

81 Interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022.

82 Interview with woman displaced community leader, Bor, 20 February 2022.

83 Interview with woman CBO chief executive officer, Torit, 21 February 2022; interview with woman neighbourhood block sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022; interview with two women community leaders, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Kolnyang, 14 February 2022; interview with woman social worker and community elder, Lekyak, 19 February 2022; interview with woman community leader and health activist, Taragok, 16 February 2022.

84 Interview with woman community leader and health activist, Taragok, 16 February 2022; interview with woman social worker and community elder, Lekyak, 19 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Kolnyang, 14 February 2022.

85 Interview with woman bench court chief, Bor, 18 February 2022.

86 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022; interview with woman community elder, Marol, 15 February 2022.

87 Interview with woman community elder, Marol, 15 February 2022.

88 Interview with woman community leader, Kolnyang, 14 February 2022; interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022; interview with woman social worker and community elder, Lekyak, 19 February 2022; interview with woman court police officer, Bor, 15 February 2022.

89 Interview with woman community leader, Kolnyang, 14 February 2022.

# STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP ACROSS SOUTH SUDAN

Women in South Sudan contend with four key cross-cutting structural dynamics that impact their abilities to take up leadership and peacebuilding positions. These are: fundamental economic and educational constraints on their abilities to take up roles; domestic pressures both in terms of time and social stigma around women in leadership; the financial and social costs of leadership roles; and the personal and reputational risks of women's leadership.

Restrictions on women's abilities to take up leadership and peacebuilding work start at home. Women articulate two key issues: 1) practical economic and educational limitations on their ability to access and hold respected and effective leadership positions; and 2) the risks of reputational and relational damage from taking up leadership positions that can be physically dangerous.

Women living across the three research sites, in both urban and rural areas, all emphasize a fundamental lack of time around their significant workloads, childcare burdens, and the need to earn income or secure household food supplies.<sup>90</sup> This limits what women can apply or put into practice from training they have received in workshops on leadership and rights.<sup>91</sup> Women from poorer backgrounds frequently note that they face greater difficulties in finding time to be in leadership roles, compared to middle-class women who can rely on their husbands for comfortable incomes.<sup>92</sup>

Several women also note the significant costs and practical burdens of taking up leadership in women's organizations or as customary authorities. A community leader in Torit notes that supporting women who have been raped in seeking justice requires time and money to get correct medical attention.<sup>93</sup> In Bor, another woman notes that care and support for disabled

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90 Interview with male sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 18 February 2022; focus group discussion with seven women, Torit, 24 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 17 February 2022; interview with male sub-chief, Fodofodo, 20 February 2022; interview with woman paramount chief, Torit, 21 February 2022; interview with woman church leader, Wau, 9 March 2022.

91 Interview with woman sub-chief, Torit town, 22 February 2022.

92 Interview with woman police officer, Wau, 23 February 2022.

93 Interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 17 February 2022.



people and widows both in neighbourhoods and in women's associations is a considerable challenge on resources and time.<sup>94</sup> The lack of state social services for support, along with the reliance of the hybrid justice system on the own time and resources of chiefs for customary arbitration, are both significant barriers to local leadership for most working-class women.

Some women express fears of being challenged about their illiteracy.<sup>95</sup> Disabilities are sometimes perceived as barring women from leadership, especially in rural areas, although in Torit a recently formed community committee specifically appointed a disabled woman as secretary to challenge these ideas.<sup>96</sup>

Women widely emphasize the risks of relational damage from pushing for leadership. In areas in Torit and Wau, many women explain that husbands stop women from taking jobs, spending time in offices or women's centres, and attending public meetings as a way of preventing challenges to their own authority at home and in public.<sup>97</sup> Women further indicate that they are put under pressure not to join women's groups for fear of affecting the family reputation.<sup>98</sup> In rural areas in Bor, women spell out that their engagement in local courts and negotiations would be seen as interfering with matters pertaining to other clans, which would risk escalating tensions between communities.<sup>99</sup> Women who speak up about gender rights and local issues are often called 'homewreckers and all sorts of names'.<sup>100</sup> Several women express fear of being divorced or facing physical attack for either taking up leadership positions or making decisions in the local community.<sup>101</sup> Women also discuss the risk of impacting the safety and prospects of their children if they speak up about either specific abuses or try to seek leadership, although this risk is diminished for women who are past child-bearing age.<sup>102</sup>

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94 Interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022.

95 Interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 17 February 2022.

96 Interview with woman CBO chief executive officer, Torit, 21 February 2022; interview with male sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit town, 18 February 2022; interview with woman neighbourhood block sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022.

97 Interview with woman CBO chief executive officer, Torit, 21 February 2022; interview with male sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022; focus group discussion with seven women, Torit, 24 February 2022; interview with woman NGO director, Torit, 23 February 2022; interview with woman church leader, Wau, 9 March 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Wau, 23 February 2022; focus group discussion with eight women, Wau, 28 February 2022.

98 Interview with woman CBO chief executive officer, Torit, 21 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 17 February 2022.

99 Interview with woman community leader and health activist, Taragok, 16 February 2022.

100 Interview with woman community leader and health activist, Taragok, 16 February 2022.

101 Interview with male CBO programme manager, Torit, 22 February 2022; interview with two women community leaders, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022; interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022; interview with woman bench court chief, Bor, 18 February 2022; interview with woman community elder, Marol, 15 February 2022.

102 Interview with woman community leader and health activist, Taragok, 16 February 2022; interview with two women community leaders, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Pariak, 14 February 2022.

Despite the central economic role most women have in both urban and rural households, they are broadly excluded from economic decision-making over key property rights. This is a crucial barrier to their leadership opportunities. Across all three research sites, and in both urban and rural families, men are the sole decision makers about ownership of land and cattle. This fundamental patriarchal control of key forms of intergenerational wealth—land and cattle—means that women cannot lead or contribute to critical decisions over marriage, divorce or adultery<sup>103</sup> because they are barred from financial responsibility or decision-making over these key assets.<sup>104</sup> In Bor, Torit and Wau, women struggle to inherit property, in particular land.<sup>105</sup> A very few wealthier urban women who have been able to build up savings have bought cattle but have ‘hidden their cows with friends’.<sup>106</sup>

Land, and therefore homes and farms, is still generally preserved as a male domain across South Sudan. This is particularly the case with common community land and is still mostly the case for urban and peri-urban land that is enclosed and sold as private property.<sup>107</sup> This privatization of urban and peri-urban land, along with high-grade farmland, as private assets with title deeds has worked to solidify the control of male family members over homes and land assets. At the same time, the commodification of urban land has actually worked in the favour of some women, who have managed to obtain title deeds in their name.<sup>108</sup> Challenges to land inheritance and ownership, however, are generally resolved in higher courts or at land registry offices, which are dominated by men.<sup>109</sup>

Despite these challenges, there have been some recent localized wins for women’s property rights. In Wau, a recent Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) intervention is reportedly seen as relatively successful in expanding women’s small livestock property holdings and

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- 103 Interview with woman CBO chief executive officer, Torit, 21 February 2022; interview with male sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022; interview with male chief, Torit town, 17 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit town, 22 February 2022; focus group discussion with seven women, Torit, 24 February 2022; interview with male CBO programme manager, Torit, 22 February 2022; interview with women’s group chair, Torit, 23 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 17 February 2022.
- 104 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Kolnyang, 14 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022; interview with woman community leader and health activist, Taragok, 16 February 2022.
- 105 Interview with woman ministry staff, Wau, February 2022.
- 106 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022; interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022; interview with woman court police officer, Bor, 15 February 2022; interview with woman community elder, Marol, 15 February 2022; interview with woman NGO director, Torit, 23 February 2022; interview with women’s group chair, Torit, 23 February 2022.
- 107 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022.
- 108 Interview with woman court police officer, Bor, 15 February 2022; interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022.
- 109 Interview with woman sub-chief, Torit town, 22 February 2022; interview with male sub-chief, Fodofodo, 20 February 2022; focus group discussion with seven women, Torit, 24 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 18 February 2022.

therefore building their economic options.<sup>110</sup> Other structural barriers are more difficult to overcome, for example accessing patriarchal decision-making spaces: In marriage negotiation interventions, only the woman Council of Traditional Authority Leaders (COTAL) chairperson for Eastern Equatoria is reported to have intervened in two meetings.<sup>111</sup>

Some women argue that their exclusion from decisions around issues that involve land and cattle is increasing due to the chronic economic crisis. In particular, women in rural areas around Bor note that they used to have more responsibility in adjudicating divorce issues but that cases are now rarely referred to women elders because economic concerns are paramount.<sup>112</sup> As such, women are excluded from crucial domestic and societal decision-making as these are areas of explicitly patriarchal economic and political control.

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110 Interview with woman church leader, Wau, 9 March 2022.

111 Interview with woman paramount chief, Torit, 21 February 2022.

112 Interview with woman community elder, Marol, 15 February 2022.

# WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN PEACE PROCESSES

Many women from across urban and rural areas and various economic and ethnic backgrounds assert that there cannot be significant progress on women's equal representation and effective leadership in local and national peace negotiations without addressing the structural barriers to women's leadership. These women also explain that effective engagement by women in peace processes requires a foundation of women's fair, respected and effective involvement in local customary justice and community leadership, rather than hoping that representation at elite levels will trickle down through legislation and central government role models.

Especially in recent years, women have engaged extensively in peacebuilding processes, albeit often in less visible roles than their male counterparts. In Wau, for example, women have participated in the recent Marial Bai and Krajina peace agreements between farmers and pastoralists, and in the negotiations over the Apuk and Aguak conflicts.<sup>113</sup> In Eastern Equatoria, the Women for Peace group in Isohe initiated dialogue during the Lolianga–Dongotono conflict in 2011, which led to sustained peace.<sup>114</sup> Women led the HITO (Hiyala, Iloli, Torit and Oudo) peace initiatives in 2012, with men joining after payam peace committees were established by UNDP.<sup>115</sup> Women were also crucial in establishing and facilitating the local peace dialogues between the Loronyo and Idali in 2019, between the Hiyala and Haforiere in 2020, and between Logir and Lango youth over revenge killing and cattle theft in 2021.<sup>116</sup> During the Hiyala peace dialogue, women describe how they took every chance to speak up as representatives of the women killed during the conflict and attempted to counter the prevailing narrative that women were to blame for the violence because they encouraged the cattle raiding by shaming the poverty of their husbands.<sup>117</sup>

In Bor in 2017, women leaders travelled between conflicting communities to lay the groundwork

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113 Interview with woman sub-chief, Wau, 23 February 2022; interview with women's group leader, Wau, 23 February 2022.

114 Interview with woman CBO chief executive officer, Torit, 21 February 2022.

115 Interview with woman CBO chief executive officer, Torit, 21 February 2022.

116 Interview with male sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022; interview with woman neighbourhood block sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022; interview with male chief, Torit town, 17 February 2022; interview with male CBO programme manager, Torit, 22 February 2022.

117 Interview with male sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022.

for negotiations towards the Jonglei peace conference in Juba, where women attended as clan representatives and (educated women as) women's representatives.<sup>118</sup> Interviewees also note that women spoke prominently at the church meeting to resolve the Abii conflict over land in December 2017, despite the presence of senior politicians.<sup>119</sup> Women clan leaders are increasingly invited to peace meetings as representatives: one woman travelled to Piiri in 2011 as a representative of the Makuach and was a member of a committee established to address the Deer–Koch community conflicts.<sup>120</sup>

These achievements are despite significant barriers to women's participation in peacebuilding at all levels. In rural areas, women are often excluded from village meetings about security issues.<sup>121</sup> Men argue that women are unable to keep secrets or that they are too honest in peace meetings and undermine prospects for reconciliation.<sup>122</sup> In peace meetings, by way of weakening gendered perspectives, women's spaces to speak are often restricted to a few voices, with women in senior political or government positions invited to speak for all women.<sup>123</sup>

At a local level in both rural and urban spaces, women note that they are not trusted to lead on issues of cultural norms and tradition.<sup>124</sup> In theory, women can play crucial roles in building peace across clan and ethnic lines via intermarriage between communities. Against this, respondents in Bor explain that when a peace meeting is between a woman's communities (that is, her birth and marital clans or ethnic groups) she can be stopped from attending or participating, due to the risk of her potential bias or sharing information between the negotiating parties.<sup>125</sup>

These obstacles to women's representation and participation flow upwards to regional and

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118 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022; interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022; interview with woman community elder, Marol, 15 February 2022.

119 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022.

120 Interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022.

121 Interview with woman sub-chief, Torit town, 18 February 2022; interview with male chief, Torit town, 17 February 2022; interview with woman paramount chief, Torit, 21 February 2022; interview with women's group chair, Torit, 23 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Wau, 23 February 2022; focus group discussion with eight women, Wau, 28 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Kolnyang, 14 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022.

122 Interview with woman sub-chief, Torit town, 18 February 2022; interview with women's group chair, Torit, 23 February 2022; interview with woman social worker and community elder, Lekyak, 19 February 2022.

123 Interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022; interview with woman quarter council leader, Bor, 16 February 2022; interview with woman social worker and community elder, Lekyak, 19 February 2022; interview with woman community leader and health activist, Taragok, 16 February 2022; interview with woman bench court chief, Bor, 18 February 2022; focus group discussion with seven women, Torit, 24 February 2022; interview with woman NGO director, Torit, 23 February 2022.

124 Interview with woman CBO chief executive officer, Torit, 21 February 2022.

125 Kumalo and Roddy-Mullineaux, 'Sustaining Peace', 2; interview with woman court police officer, Bor, 15 February 2022.

national peace processes. The female Council of Traditional Authority Leaders (COTAL) chairperson for Eastern Equatoria explains that she was not invited to recent national peace processes, and that she knows of other high-profile senior women leaders who did attend but were not allowed to enter the meeting space.<sup>126</sup> Such restrictions obviously limit the possibilities for women to make meaningful contributions to these processes.

Political suspicions and deep wounds from the Second Sudanese Civil War and continuing local conflicts create further barriers to women's leadership in peacebuilding. Because of the connection of customary authority to judicial and government power, both men and women chiefs and sub-chiefs have been seen as 'allies or spies of the government' in peace meetings.<sup>127</sup>

Especially since 2013, deep political divisions have been propagated along ethnic lines during national conflicts in 2014–2015 and 2016–2018, and during the sustained regional conflicts beginning in 2013 and continuing to the present. Some women describe tribalism as 'the big coronavirus now'.<sup>128</sup> In Wau town, for example, where there have been repeated ethnicized clashes both among residents and between residents and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) from 2014 to 2019, these conflicts have created continuing divisions between women in both towns and rural areas.<sup>129</sup> In all three research sites, national and local conflicts and disputes between clans and communities are interconnected.<sup>130</sup> Even where women of different ethnic backgrounds and clan affiliations are trying to work together, political suspicion, anger, pain and mistrust colour their everyday organizing work. Consequently, interviewees noted that engaging in women's organizing also requires managing your anger.<sup>131</sup>

Displacement to urban centres has also created ethnic issues that affect local organizing efforts. While rural women explain how their women's representatives organize with their counterparts in rural displaced settlements, migrant and displaced women in all three urban centres note that they are nervous about taking up local leadership if they are an ethnic minority locally, as they feel exposed to social stigma and direct threats.<sup>132</sup> In Torit, however, it is increasingly common for women neighbourhood-level sub-chiefs from the Nuer and Dinka communities to

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126 Interview with woman paramount chief, Torit, 21 February 2022.

127 Interview with woman sub-chief, Torit town, 18 February 2022.

128 Focus group discussion with eight women, Wau, 28 February 2022.

129 Interview with civil society worker, Wau, February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Wau, 23 February 2022.

130 Joshua Craze, 'The War They Call Peace', *New Left Review*, 9 July 2021. Accessed 9 July 2021, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/the-war-they-call-peace>; Alan Boswell, 'Conflict and Crisis in South Sudan's Equatoria', Special report, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 14 April 2021, 24.

131 Interview with male sub-chief, Fodofodo, 20 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 17 February 2022.

132 Interviews with women in Wau, Torit and Bor, February and March 2022.

be appointed by their local neighbourhoods.<sup>133</sup>

In recent years, the centralization of political control has meant that appointments beyond the neighbourhood or *payam* level are tightly controlled.<sup>134</sup> There is limited consultation over candidates for women's representatives or government posts at county and state level, and it is widely assumed that such decisions are made by senior male politicians and security staff.<sup>135</sup> Some women in Torit even indicate that they believe women politicians are instructed what to say by senior staff.<sup>136</sup> In the current political climate, some educated women with senior positions report being nervous about speaking up for fear of physical harm or other repercussions simply because they are women in positions authority.<sup>137</sup>

All of these dynamics, including the current political tensions and economic and political inequalities, affect women's abilities to organize together in equitable and effective ways. As well as practical difficulties such as language differences, distance and a lack of space and time to meet,<sup>138</sup> women note that there is intense competition over the limited leadership and representative positions along ethnic, clan and class lines.<sup>139</sup> Women across the research sites emphasize the impact of deep social inequalities, especially in terms of education, economic power and wealth and urban residence, which creates jealousy and undermines a sense of unity among women.<sup>140</sup> In Wau, one woman asserts that wealthy women are unable to lead because they would use their wealth to escape conflict and would not therefore care deeply about the community.<sup>141</sup> These divisions also cut across groups that in theory have similar educational and economic backgrounds; for example, between various women's groups in towns, undermining

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133 Interview with woman paramount chief, Torit, 21 February 2022.

134 Joshua Craze and Ferenc David Marko, 'Death by Peace: How South Sudan's Peace Agreement Ate the Grassroots', *African Arguments*, 6 January 2022. Accessed 10 January 2022, [africanarguments.org/2022/01/death-by-peace-how-south-sudans-peace-agreement-ate-the-grassroots/](https://africanarguments.org/2022/01/death-by-peace-how-south-sudans-peace-agreement-ate-the-grassroots/).

135 Interview with woman ministry staff, Wau, February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022.

136 Interview with male chief, Torit town, 17 February 2022; interview with male CBO programme manager, Torit, 22 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 17 February 2022.

137 Interview with woman ministry staff, Wau, February 2022.

138 Interview with woman church leader, Wau, 9 March 2022; focus group discussion with eight women, Wau, 28 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Akuol Ayol, 18 February 2022; interview with woman court police officer, Bor, 15 February 2022.

139 Interview with woman sub-chief, Torit town, 18 February 2022; focus group discussion with seven men, Torit, 25 February 2022; interview with woman community leader, Bor, 17 February 2022; interview with woman social worker and community elder, Lekyak, 19 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Wau, 23 February 2022; interview with women's group leader, Wau, 23 February 2022; focus group discussion with eight women, Wau, 28 February 2022.

140 Focus group discussion with seven women, Torit, 24 February 2022; interview with woman NGO director, Torit, 23 February 2022; interview with woman neighbourhood block sub-chief, Torit town, 19 February 2022; interview with woman paramount chief, Torit, 21 February 2022; interview with woman church leader, Wau, 9 March 2022; interview with woman community leader and health activist, Taragok, 16 February 2022.

141 Interview with woman church leader, Wau, 9 March 2022.

mutual support and organization.<sup>142</sup> Fragmented women's leadership and support networks undercut the abilities of women leaders to weather the economic and political crises and attacks that they face when they take up positions of authority.

More fundamentally, women from all backgrounds discuss deep divisions over the best path forward for women's leadership. Many note that conservative women are favoured for appointments because they align politically with their male counterparts in many decisions, especially in rural areas; moreover, they can also argue for maintaining harmful cultural standards and misogynist hierarchies.<sup>143</sup> There are sometimes differences over tactics: some women argue for an incremental approach and others for urgent intervention. This sometimes creates hierarchies of women leaders; for example, neighbourhood sub-chiefs seeking more equitable settlements over domestic violence and property rights are often frustrated with Torit town court decisions, while significantly more senior women in positions of customary authority in Eastern Equatoria with more conservative-aligned standards argue that the decisions are actually fair.<sup>144</sup> These divisions demonstrate not only significant differences of location, education, experience and class background among the broad category 'women' in South Sudan but also reveal differences of political belief, ethics and social standards.

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142 Interview with woman community leader and health activist, Taragok, 16 February 2022.

143 Focus group discussion with eight women, Wau, 28 February 2022; interview with woman NGO director, Torit, 23 February 2022; interview with male CBO programme manager, Torit, 22 February 2022; interview with woman sub-chief, Torit, 17 February 2022.

144 Interview with Woman paramount chief, Torit, 21 February 2022.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

In the last decade, there have been significant shifts in women's access to leadership, especially in urban areas across South Sudan. These limited and fragmented but significant changes are pushing patriarchal authorities to rethink the potential contributions and roles of women in their households, clans and communities, as well as across local and national government levels. There is a powerful ongoing discussion among women themselves about their rights to govern and lead. There are several possible paths for moving this discussion forward, including recommendations from the women who participated in the study upon which this report is based.

## PROGRAMME PLANNING AND ACTIVITIES

1. Throughout the course of this research, women asked for time and space to meet and learn from one another. Stories of successes in peace mediation and leadership travel across distances and social divides. Many women suggest a diverse range of exchange visits and meetings: between local rural and urban areas to build connections and support, and between regions to foster trust and develop strategy from the neighbourhood to the national level. Connections could be built that also provide fora for business planning, such as meetings between women market workers and traders across a state, or fora for focused or targeted programme design; for example, between disabled women.
2. Local residents are best placed to work out how to lobby for increased posts at both court and local government levels, and to campaign for specific local legal and rights-focused wins. Women propose supporting planning meetings to build lobbies and pressure campaigns for these projects.
1. Basic material support is important. Women working towards leadership in customary authorities and clan or sub-tribe leadership and mediation ask for funds for customary authority sashes and uniforms, bicycles, phones, and chairs for women court members and committees. This is a matter of gaining respect and equity, as well as supporting organizational capacity.
2. Programme planning should consider its own structural impact on women's time and resources. Women suggest limiting time consuming and sometimes divisive survey-based needs assessments insofar as possible. Many also propose ruralizing projects or prioritizing work in rural areas. These shifts could be quite radical; for instance, holding meetings in rural locations rather than urban spaces. This may work towards bridging the space, class and educational gaps between women in rural and urban areas, and showing respect for the space, travel time and communities of

rural women.

3. During their participation in this research, some women suggest radical measures to counteract prevailing patriarchal norms of speaking time and representation in courts and meetings, such as boycotting meetings or peace summits where there is no (or even insufficient) women's representation.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL ADMINISTRATION**

4. Women working in the humanitarian and development sectors and in national NGOs (NNGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) recommend that organizations consider implementing positive discrimination policies in hiring processes.
5. Women also recommended bias-challenging training with male staff, along with developing robust policies and processes for reporting and addressing harassment, misogyny, and sexual misconduct or abuse in the workplace.

## **FUNDERS**

6. This research adds to the widespread call for long-term funding and programmes that provide continuities of support and engagement, and include local residents in their design and strategy. This includes funding for sustained investment in business schemes for women, such as business start-ups, loans or grants provided by a variety of programmes, and provide long-term support designed with and for women.
7. Women organizers need both space and time in the face of fundamental economic and workload constraints. Funding meetings, association spaces and basic equipment is not frivolous but foundational.

# GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS, WORDS AND PHRASES

<b><i>boma</i></b>	smallest unit of local government administration; below payams.
<b>CBO</b>	community-based organization
<b>COTAL</b>	Council of Traditional Authority Leaders
<b>IDP</b>	internally displaced person
<b>NNGO</b>	national non-governmental organization
<b><i>payam</i></b>	second-level administrative unit; below counties
<b>SPLA</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Army

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