

# Gender-Based Violence: How South Sudan is fighting back

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## INTRODUCTION

From the first Sudanese civil war in 1955 to cyclical conflicts post-independence, the scarlet cord of violence is inextricably woven into the history of South Sudan. Within this shadow of perpetual destabilisation lies a more entrenched issue: gender-based violence (GBV).

The United Nations (UN) defines GBV as “harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals based on their gender” which is “rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms”.<sup>[1]</sup> This definition acknowledges the fact that while women and girls suffer disproportionately from GBV, men and boys can also be targeted.

GBV includes a variety of violations from physical, sexual and emotional violence to female genital mutilation and human trafficking. It also encompasses threats of violence, financial abuse, coercion and manipulation.<sup>[2]</sup>

## THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Decades-long conflicts in South Sudan have fostered a culture of impunity that has exacerbated the issue of GBV.<sup>[3]</sup> However, this is not a scourge specific to any particular country. A 2018 analysis of prevalence data conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that worldwide; “nearly 1 in 3 women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence or both”. They also estimate that globally, as many as “38% of all murders of women are committed by intimate partners”.<sup>[4]</sup> Data specific to South Sudan indicate a similarly concerning prevalence.

Even in periods of relative peace, home is anything but a place of safety for South Sudanese victims of GBV. A UN GBV report in 2019<sup>[5]</sup> revealed that, in South Sudan, about 65% of women will experience some form of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) such as child marriage and rape in their lifetime. In addition, 33% of women in South Sudan have experienced sexual violence from a non-partner, primarily during attacks or raids. According to the same report, 51% of women in South Sudan have suffered intimate partner violence (IPV). These alarming statistics paint a picture of a stark reality that can only be understood by engaging with victims and the people who support them.

## SITUATION ON THE GROUND: A LAWYER’S PERSPECTIVE

Bol Madut Ayii is a lawyer and co-founder of Screen of Rights, a grassroots South Sudanese human rights organisation. He has worked on prolific cases of gender-based violence, some involving victims as young as nine years old.

In Mr Ayii’s experience, most reported GBV cases in South Sudan are between spouses. The intimacy of the relationship between perpetrator and victim is one of the many barriers that stand between people seeking and obtaining justice. In the event that a victim reports an assault to the police, they are likely to be faced with an inexperienced or poorly trained officer who may send them away to “sort out their issues at home”.

If a case is filed and proceeds to the judicial system, economically disadvantaged victims are often reliant on the charity of lawyers like Mr Ayii, whose pro-bono

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work ensures that they can be represented in court. Even at this stage, further challenges arise. These include trial delays due to high numbers of backlogged cases, threats and intimidation from powerful perpetrators and bribery of court officials. Unfortunately for victims, institutional obstacles and scarcity of resources are only part of the problem.

Lack of awareness of available avenues for support and justice prevents people who may be willing to seek help from doing so, meaning the number of reported cases of GBV in South Sudan is likely the tip of the iceberg. Although many factors contribute to and perpetuate GBV, Mr Ayii postulates that dysfunctional elements of South Sudanese culture play a key role.

### **CULTURAL CONTEXT OF GBV IN SOUTH SUDAN**

Given the impact of culture on family dynamics and gender norms, any discourse on GBV must be culturally informed and contextualised. The 64 ethnic groups of South Sudan<sup>[6]</sup> are unique and distinct from one another but certain norms and social values are widely shared.

#### **The implications of bride price**

Mr Ayii has observed that across many South Sudanese cultures, “GBV starts right from the marriage process” where both parties are coerced into a union that is not of their choosing. Arranged marriages are often negotiated by male relatives, who tend to prioritise the needs and status of the couples’ families above the desires and wellbeing of the couple. This creates fertile ground for resentment to take root within the union and is further complicated by the issue of bride price.

Bride price, although not unique to South Sudan, is an age-old concept that holds cultural significance to many African communities. It refers to forms of wealth paid by a groom or his family to the woman or the family of the woman he is about to marry.<sup>[7]</sup>

Bride price is treasured for what it represents and for the value or status it adds to families. It is widely acknowledged that some men use it to justify mistreatment directed at their wives when they do not meet their demands or expectations. Academic studies have established a link between gender stereotypes and male violence. According to a 2018 study, men who hold patriarchal stereotypes that support male dominance, ‘tend to blame women and children for breaking expected dutiful, submissive behaviours, thereby validating violence as a legitimate form of social control’.<sup>[8]</sup> Within this context, perhaps there needs to be a paradigm shift in the way dowry is regarded in South Sudan.

Mr Ayii states that bride price “should not denote the

value or worth of a woman”. It should instead serve as “a token of appreciation to her birth family, which is in a way, through her marriage, losing a loved, valuable member”. Traditionally, bride price was also intended to enable the bride’s brothers to start families of their own. The interplay of cultural norms and economic incentives further complicates the issue of bride price.

Adhieu Majok, a South Sudanese commentator and activist, has used her significant online platform to address pressing social issues, particularly regarding gender equality. In her 2018 essay, “The Girl and the 500 Cows: The Commodification of Girls in South Sudan”,<sup>[9]</sup> she observed that compared to the modest bride prices of one or two generations ago, marriage has become an expensive, high stakes endeavour for young men and their families. She attributes this to high inflation, poverty, and cyclical conflicts within South Sudan. As a result, “girls and women have become a source of wealth for families” and exorbitant demands continue to fuel communal conflicts and cattle raids, especially in rural areas. It is clear given the current economic situation that the status quo is unsustainable and will only foment further instability and gender inequality in the country.

#### **Gender Beliefs and Norms**

Ms Majok highlights another important issue that underlies most gender-based conflict and violence in South Sudan: the view of women as inferior or second-class citizens. In her personal experience, even in the arena of women’s advocacy, male voices are afforded precedence and attention that is rarely given to their female counterparts.

The viewpoint of women being “less than” has taken root in society partly because the misogyny scaffolding it is espoused by women. Mr Ayii has observed that in many communities, “disciplining” wives through physical violence is not just accepted but even expected, with widely held opinions like “he is not a man if he does not slap me”. It is also not unusual, he adds, for a man to be ridiculed by other men for considering his wife’s views or trying to reason amicably with her instead of dismissing her or resorting to violence.

Many theorize that domestic violence is driven by a desire to gain and maintain control. Michael Kaufman, a Canadian author and gender equality campaigner theorises that domestic violence can be understood as a “weapon to establish and maintain power” and “cope with the fear of not being a real man”.<sup>[10]</sup> The scope of acceptable male behaviour is shaped by culturally informed gender roles. Challenges can arise when men perceive or experience difficulty in fulfilling these roles or in meeting societal expectations of manhood.

Mr Ayii states that widespread unemployment and

joblessness is a significant threat to male identity in South Sudan, especially as so many cultures highlight the role of the man as a provider. Evidence has shown that unemployment is strongly linked with harmful alcohol use and vice versa.<sup>[11]</sup> According to a review by the Southern African Alcohol Policy Alliance (SAAPA) and the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), women whose partners were regularly intoxicated were almost six times more likely to experience IPV or GBV.<sup>[12]</sup> GBV is inextricable from wider social issues and any solutions proposed to tackle it must take a holistic approach.

## THE WAY FORWARD

On the 3rd of December 2020, the Judiciary of South Sudan declared operationalisation of the country's first Gender Based Violence and Juvenile Court, supported by the UNDP and the Government of the Netherlands.<sup>[13]</sup> The court aims to operate from a survivor centred perspective by providing dedicated and expedited trials of GBV cases, prioritising the privacy and well-being of victims and holding perpetrators accountable.

While the role of international non-governmental organisations cannot be overstated, South Sudanese have been pivotal in the creation of campaigns and organisations aimed at tackling GBV and empowering women and girls to reach their highest potential. Organisations like Crown the Woman South Sudan (CREW) and Federation of women Lawyers South Sudan (FIDA) promote meaningful gender equality and equity with a long-term view of nation building and development.<sup>[14,15]</sup>

Other organisations like Men4Women are taking the lead in reframing what it means to be a modern South Sudanese man. Men4Women is a non-governmental organisation that engages boys and men in conversations about gender equality and reproductive health. They also organise constructive, innovative behavioural change activities for men that challenge societal stereotypes about the role of a man. These activities include cooking challenges, which empower men with the skills to nourish themselves and defy limitations on what men are allowed or supposed to do.

Such organisations and initiatives recognise a fundamental truth in the quest for harmony in South Sudanese homes and society at large: male allies are essential to the realisation of any progress. Too often, the burden has fallen on women to speak up and advocate for themselves, even though not many are prepared to hear them.

It is no small task to frame new, challenging ideas in a way that people are open to receiving. Mr Ayii has observed from his own experiences in advocacy that individuals and communities are more receptive to positive incentives to change rather than criticisms of what they are doing

wrong.

For example, he challenges opposition to girl's education by pointing to examples of educated South Sudanese women who have gone on to empower and enrich their communities as a result of the opportunities education has afforded them. This, he proposes, is a far more effective strategy than chastising people for not keeping up with the times. Similarly, conversations around gender roles and relations must be framed by understanding and sensitivity without compromising on truth.

## CONCLUSION

GBV is a symptom of a society at dis-ease with itself. Any attempt to address it without considering the cultural context in which it occurs, the beliefs underlying it and the social issues perpetuating it is likely to be futile. Likewise, one-sided solutions that exclude boys and men fail to recognize that GBV is not only a women's issue. It is a societal issue that affects everyone whether they are direct victims or not.

Despite the significant challenges the nation faces, South Sudanese individuals and organisations have demonstrated inspiring initiative and creativity in tackling GBV. The way forward may be difficult but by no means impossible.

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