

# Caught between War and its Aftermath: The Experience of Internally Displaced Women in Sudan

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## Introduction

This paper focuses on the experience of internally displaced women in Sudan during armed conflicts and its aftermath, in particular in displaced persons' camps in the Triple Capital<sup>1</sup>, Khartoum.

To enhance the analysis, the paper also uses fieldwork data gathered by in-depth interviews, discussion groups and oral testimonies to highlight women's experiences and to raise their voices during the armed conflict in Sudan. This includes their experience at the camps.

Moreover, as Vickers (1993) argues, war has an influence on gender relations, as it reinforces gender inequality and diverts resources from development. It is women who suffer most from lack of health services, poor education and economic stagnation. Nevertheless, and despite their great suffering during war, displaced women had managed to develop a wide range of livelihood strategies. These included taking new roles to provide for their families and to protect them.

## The war

Armed conflict in Sudan was the major factor that led to displacement almost all over Sudan. However, my focus here will be on the war in Southern Sudan, which emerged in 1983 when Bor garrison, in the South, led by John Garang, refused to take orders from the central government and mutinied. This marked the birth of SPLA which led to the second civil war in the South (Ruiz 1998: 143; Deng and

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<sup>1</sup> Khartoum is called Triple Capital, being composed of three cities, which are Khartoum, Khartoum North and Omdurman.

Miner 1992:17). This war has been regarded as one of the bloodiest wars in Africa, which has claimed the lives of two million people. However, it has also been labelled as a forgotten war (Ruiz 1998: 139). After many peace negotiations, eventually in January 2005 the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in Nairobi to end the fighting (Malik 2005: 33; Verney 2006, Online)<sup>2</sup>.

A lot has been written on the human cost of war in Southern Sudan. Johnson (2003: 151), for example, argues that in Southern Sudan the activities of warring parties have massively widened the scope of the war. Battles between the warring parties, with the intention of capturing territory, are not the only aspect of fighting. From the outset of the war civilians have been systematically targeted, as well as their resources. Social resources such as houses, schools and clinics were destroyed. Economic resources such as farms and livestock were also burnt and stolen. Environmental resources such as wild animals and trees were killed or destroyed. Moreover, large areas were littered with landmines and anti-personnel mines (Johnson 2001: 115; Verney *et al*: 1995). This made the countryside unsafe and affected farming and rearing of animals, the main sources of livelihood.

## Multi impact of war on gender relations

Feminist literature on women in conflict areas reveals and theorises the ways in which war is gendered in different ways such as its institutions, its agents and the destruction it causes (Macklin 2004:75). For example, the war in Southern Sudan led to a shortage of men, forced and early marriages and poor health and education facilities.

### *a. Shortage of men*

War led to a shortage of men in Southern Sudan. Abdel Salam and de Waal (2001:103) indicate that women in Southern Sudan constitute 60% of the entire population because men either joined the SPLA or died. A UNICEF estimation in 2001 suggested that the male population of Bahr al-Ghazal was only 25% (IRIN 2003, Online; Chawla 2003, cited in Fluehr-Lobban 2005:273). This low rate of men in Southern Sudan could be explained by a variety of reasons. Men in Southern Sudan have joined the armed militia, others have moved to the North looking for educational or training opportunities, and some went abroad. Some have died (Abdel Salam and de Waal 2001:103; Macklin 2004:82)), but there is no quantitative data to reveal the numbers of those who died. In such situations women have to take up new roles. This affects gender roles as a woman from Juba says:

In the past there was a clear line between the roles played by a man and a woman. For instance, men in the countryside were responsible for digging, women used to fetch water and cook...now women can do more. (El-Bushra and Sahl 2005:37)

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2 In January 2011 people from Southern Sudan voted for independence and on 9<sup>th</sup> July this year, Southern Sudan was declared an independent country

Women were left behind in communities shattered by war with poor, or no education, no political voice, poor resources and poor access to income-generating activities. Nearly half of the households were headed by women (Fluehr-Lobban 2005: 273). Moreover, the war had made the countryside unsafe.

Abdel Salam and de Waal (2001: 109) point out that women's and girls' workloads, in particular their domestic tasks, had increased dramatically as they had to walk long distances, for instance, ten miles, to fetch water and firewood. Other domestic tasks women did included farming and building their huts.

### *b. Forced and early marriages*

War also reinforced early marriages among families, in particular poor families, as a livelihood strategy and to ease their economic burden<sup>3</sup>. Girls accepted forced marriages in order to protect their families (El-Bushra and Sahl 2005: 35) or to help them financially. In such a harsh environment young girls became powerless when their families put pressure on them to get married. When a young girl gets married her husband should pay a dowry to her family in form of heads of cattle. Thus, marriage was seen as a material transaction rather than a personal bond between husband and wife. This family arrangement made divorce difficult as the wife had to get her family support and permission which may be difficult to gain since in the case of divorce the family would have to return the dowry (IRIN 2003, Online).

Second, marriage offered a girl a protection against sexual assaults and protection by a male guardian. Third, it was a strategy to avoid girls getting pregnant outside marriage (UNICEF 2005, Online). Fourth, for some families, it could be a strategy to start accumulating a new stock of animal wealth.

#### **Box 1:** illustrating girls' early marriages

In Southern Sudan, a teenage girl is more likely to be a wife than a student. Out of a population of over 7 million people, only about 500 girls complete primary school each year. By contrast, one in five adolescent girls is already a mother (UNICEF 2005, Online)

Payment of bride-wealth gave men a high position as heads of households and the right to control the labour and productivity of their wives and children (El-Bushra and Sahl 2005: 35). By contrast the wife had no power or right even to get a divorce and divorce became a family matter that had links to the survival of her family. In this sense, the gender relations within the household (husband and wife) were shaped by extended families, which had a say on marriage and divorce.

### *c. Health*

War destroyed infrastructure including health clinics, transport etc and the suffering of women during war could be illustrated by the life expectancy of women from Southern Sudan, which was forty years (Macklin 2004:82). Furthermore, women's quality of life was one of the lowest in the world. In some war-affected areas, for

3 In Southern Sudan men pay *mahr*, bride-wealth, in form of cash and gifts or cows (El-Bushra and Sahl 2005: 35)

example, the rate of maternal deaths reached 862 per 100,000 (IRIN 2003, Online). Abdel Salam and de Waal (2001:104-105) claim that in Southern Sudan there was no discrimination in terms of provision of health services, however, men controlled their wives' access to family planning. This could be done simply by preventing their wives from attending a family planning clinic, where information and materials on family planning are available. This may lead to unwanted pregnancy and more children than women would like to have. Both would be an extra burden women have to deal with. Fluehr-Lobban (2005:267) also indicates that although contraception facilities may be available in cities and towns they were not available to single women especially after imposing the Islamic ideology.

The infant mortality rate is high. For example, in 2000 it was 73 per 1,000 live births whereas for under-fives the mortality rate was 115 per 1,000 live births (Fluehr-Lobban 2005: 267). These two high rates of mortality may explain men's behaviour in not allowing their wives to have access to birth control and to have many children. Also the high mortality rate could be a factor discouraging women from using birth control materials.

#### *d. Education*

The prolonged war had also affected the education system, leading to the closure of many schools, transferring some from the rural to urban centre or from the urban areas to Khartoum. These had many implications for the younger generations and deprived them from their right to education. However, it seems that poor girls suffered more from such policies as they were reluctant to go to school (or public places) in rags. Therefore, they may end up in early marriages or relationships with soldiers, who were more likely to get them pregnant (Abdel Salam and de Waal 2001: 106).

**Box 2:** showing the situation of girls' education

In some schools the average class size was five hundred pupils of which the number of girls ranged from five to thirty. In Rumbek and Yirol counties, the numbers of girls who went to school was only 6.6%. Girls' enrolment was half that of boys and fell sharply by secondary school level. At this age girls were prevented from going to school for many reasons, including lack of uniform and the belief that education would make them corrupt. Also marriage brings economic bonuses in the form of dowry paid to the family, (Abdel Salam and de Waal 2001:103).

Negative perceptions about girls' education were another barrier that hampered the education of girls and limited their chances in education. For example, men believed that women were their rivals and that educated girls would abandon their traditional roles as housewives and child-bearers. This perception made men reluctant to marry educated girls and prefer to marry those with less or no education, as the latter would be able to perform their domestic tasks. Moreover, educated girls were believed to be less respectful of social norms and traditions and their families feared that this would bring shame. Moreover, believing that girls' role was a reproductive one e.g., to help their mothers with child care, cleaning and fetching water, reduced girls' chances in education (Abdel Salam and de Wall 2001:107).

*e. Violence against women*

Women were subject to some sort of violence. El-Bushra and Sahl (2005: 33) state that when Sudan was in a state of war, many civil servants, in particular in war zones, did not get regular salaries and were unable to provide for their families. This had led to domestic violence between wives and husbands and some men turned to alternative ways to earn a living, such as taking guns and joining the army. Many men felt that they could take the law into their own hands by, for example, taking or abducting girls by force.

**Box 3:** showing a narrative by a woman who was living in Juba

There are a lot of cases where men go with young girls because they have money. They deceive the girls and because the girls are poor due to this present situation, they give in, thinking that the men will marry them and they will have a good life. In most cases when the girls get pregnant the men reject them...some girls give in to men at an early stage because of threats by soldiers: "if you refuse me I will finish you off" (El-Bushra and Sahl 2005: 33-36)

Moreover, women did not only suffer from the risk of public violence created by the external enemy but also from violence created by men from the local community. Domestic violence and coerced sex increased between husbands and wives (Jok 1999: 2000, cited in Macklin 2004:88). Domestic violence also occurred when combatants returned homes to find their wives with other men. This may lead to the husband killing the wife and her new partner (El-Bushra and Sahl 2005: 37)).

Women who were victims of domestic violence may not walk out of a violent relationship due to social factors such as a shortage of men, the stigma of divorce, or issues of custody of children as well as economic factors such as lack of income-earning opportunities (Pankhurst 2008: 311). Other factors such as fear of insecurity and violence outside the households created by armed conflict and insecurity, as is the case in Western and Southern Sudan, may discourage women from leaving their domestic abusers, "*Better the devil you know than the devil you do not*".

## **Displacement and its gender dynamics**

To escape the armed conflict people had to seek safety in different areas such as Khartoum, the host of nearly 2 million internally displaced persons. People also needed to build their own shelters and to find a new source of livelihood. Here I will focus on the experience of internally displaced women in Al-Salam and Mayo displaced persons' camps in Khartoum which includes their role as breadwinners and protectors of their families as well as their role at the community level.

*a. Women's role as breadwinners*

Women at the camps managed to develop different livelihood strategies to earn income. This included trading in food and drink such as tea, which was legal as well as trading in alcohol and prostitution, which were illegal, according to *Sharia*

law. Prostitution. A remarkable perspective on prostitution, as an illegal livelihood strategy, comes from Aziza, my youngest prostitute respondent, in Al-Salam camp who narrates:

I have tried all means of survival but all did not work except prostitution. That is because there is much demand for it...I earn a lot from that...I want you to know that was not my choice. This is a choice I was forced to make, in darkness and behind closed doors...It is awful to earn money from something people around you even your daily customers are ashamed to speak about. It is scary to earn a living from something your government regards as illegal. It is so scary to know that you will be finished if the police catch you. On the other hand it is a job I do to survive here, and in urban places too. In this sense it is OK for me to do it otherwise me and my mother would die from hunger.<sup>4</sup>

Aziza's narrative illustrates that despite all moral, social and legal constraints, she had strong economic and social reasons to justify her involvement with this dangerous urban livelihood strategy which had proven to be profitable.

To minimise risk involved in prostitution, the prostitutes tended to limit their services to local people they knew, to their old customers or to new customers introduced to them by their old customers. Although this strategy may help to reduce chances of being caught, thus saving the livelihood itself, it reduced the income a prostitute would get.<sup>5</sup>

It is also relevant here to state that financial assistance such as getting a loan is very significant for running a business and developing new livelihoods. Based on that, some displaced persons sought loans from banks but were turned down, as explained by the following narrative from Scholl, a female who lived in Mayo camp, about the disregard of displaced persons by bankers when they approached them for financial assistance. She said:

I know citizens have the right to get a loan from banks. My husband read that in a newspaper but when I went with him to seek a loan nobody helped us...we tried many banks several times but without any success.<sup>6</sup>

This narrative illustrates that being a displaced person could jeopardise one's chances of getting a loan to build a new livelihood strategy. As help from banks, for example, is denied, some displaced persons are left in limbo. However, they had to keep searching for alternative ways to survive beyond the "money lenders" structure.

#### *b. Women's role as protectors*

Sadia, a 60 years old woman from Southern Sudan who resided in Al-Salam camp, was married but her husband no longer lived with her. She spoke about her ordeal and subsequently, the new gender role she had to take up:

I did not have a husband to protect me. When we moved here he started drinking heavily. He used to beat me and make a lot of noises that my neighbours could hear. I felt so insecure and embarrassed about that. I spoke to our *sultan* (leader) in the camp, who divorced us. I then be-

4 Oral testimony, Al-Salam displaced persons' camp, July 2002

5 Oral testimonies, Al-Salam displaced persons' camps, July 2002

6 In-depth interview, Mayo displaced persons' camp, June 2002

came a free woman. Later I found a job and was able to take care of my children. I fed them and protected them...I had good neighbours who were always ready to help<sup>7</sup>

Sadia's narrative showed that she had to be not only the main provider for her family, but also the protector. Moreover, her neighbours offered help to her and her children. The narrator also revealed the main factor that triggered changes in her gender role, which was not loss or death of the husband, but choosing not to have a husband (by divorcing him) due to other factors such as him being abusive and drunk.

### *c. Independent access to information*

In the absence of electricity and new technology such as computers and the internet, as sources of information, many displaced persons had to rely on other means to have access to information. One of these sources was radios that used batteries. That was common among men who would gather under trees by the road or at the market to listen to a radio owned by a friend.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, women, in particular those who worked in the city as maids and domestic servants, could watch TV and listen to the radio and chat with their employers on what they got from the radio and TV. Amona, from Mayo camp, who worked as a domestic servant in Khartoum North said to me:

I had been working with my employer for more than 5 years...they treated me as if I was a family member...I could watch TV once I finished my daily duties. I could also take food and newspapers home.

Women who traded outside the camps were also involved in marketing networks outside the camps. These networks included cash and carry shops, minibus drivers and shop retailers. From these networks, women could gather useful information.

Women tended to share information obtained outside the camps with women in the camps, their families and relatives. In this way women contributed to information gathering, sharing and networking in their community. Azia, a woman from Mayo camp who sold food in Khartoum North said:

We women created our own network of information...women who went to town had a chance to see what was going on there, spoke to their employers or customers, visited some officials and may get information from them. Even those who had been imprisoned brought some valuable information to us when they were released. This information was then passed on by word of mouth and shared with people in the camp... at least there was no need to depend on men to tell you about what was going on because they simply did not bother telling us...they thought that we did not deserve to know...this made us feel strong, informed, independent and powerful... we could also chat with our husbands and neighbours about what we knew.<sup>9</sup>

In this sense, women's newly developed livelihood strategies did not only help them to earn income, put also exposed them to the outside world and facilitated their access to information and helped them to gain an opportunity to be a source of in-

7 Women only discussion group, Al-Salam displaced persons' camp, July 2002

8 Informal observation, Al-Salam and Mayo displaced persons' camps, June-September 2002

9 In-depth interview, Mayo displaced persons' camp, August 2002

formation, as men did, and not only 'recipients' of information. Thus, information gathering and sharing at the household and community level was no longer a male preserve. Women could get involved in conversations with each other and with their family members about issues related to their business such as a rise in fuel prices, and political issues such as peace negotiation, repatriation etc.

#### *d. Community role and relations*

At displaced persons' camps women were able to develop relations across their gender and to provide assistance and support to each other. For example, newcomers to the camps would get help and support. Moreover, many women were able to develop a community-based revolving fund (*khata*), which was a women's self-help saving scheme, where each woman paid a small amount of money each month, and every month a woman took that money to be used for different purposes such as paying school fees, buying new household furniture or helping husbands to repay loans.<sup>10</sup> Here it worth mentioning that such revolving fund initiatives were not unique to Sudanese displaced women as other displaced women in different countries such as Uganda had developed a similar financial self-help scheme. For example, Acholi women from Uganda who were displaced in Kitgum had developed similar *kalulu* (revolving funds) to help members of the group to overcome financial difficulties associated with their displacement experience (Olaa 2001:108).

Some of these *tajamoat* also had *jameeiat* (informal co-operatives). Women who were members of these *jameeiat* had agreed to buy some households items such as big pots, serving plates, big tents, and blankets which could be used by the members or the community, for wedding parties and other social occasions.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, the *tajamoat* could be regarded as informal financial institutions which were meant to ease displaced women's financial difficulties.

### **Pattern of return to the South**

Displaced persons started returning to their place of origin in 1991 when SPLA managed to control much of the South, thus creating a positive atmosphere for displaced persons to return home (Ruiz 1998: 150). However, this did not last long. In the late 1991 SPLA-United attacked Dinka civilians in Bor. This decreased the returning pattern and increased displacement.

The second and the largest pattern of return emerged after the signing of the CPA, as the agreement itself focuses on voluntary return, thus bringing more hope for return to places of origin. Before returning, some displaced persons tended to send male relatives to assess the situation in terms of security, resources available as well as potential constraints, as information provided by the authorities was unreliable as it mostly based on political objectives rather than the reality there. In this

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10 In-depth interviews, Al-Salam and Mayo displaced persons' camps, June-August 2002

11 Women only discussion groups, Al-Salam and Mayo displaced persons camps, June-August 2002

context, the international community, such as NRC, has established an Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) to provide information to those who want to return (Mezza 2005: 40). For example, the spontaneous return of displaced persons at Mabia, South of Tambura showed difficulties that returnees would face on their way back home. Lorenz (2005:37-38) shows that several international organisations including IOM assisted some 5,000 displaced persons from ten different tribes to return to their villages in Bahr al Ghazal. They had to struggle with mines, mosquitoes, guinea worms, swamps and rivers etc. Their journey was planned to take 30 days but it took three and a half months. 43 lives were lost and 23 displaced persons were crushed to death by a truck before the arrival of IOM.

Research by the Livelihoods and Social Protection Cluster of the Joint Assessment Mission (JAM), UNHCR, suggested that by 2007 about 70% of displaced persons would have returned (Malik 2005:32). However, it seems that this estimation was exaggerated and did not reflect the reality, as many who it was thought would go back to their place of origin did not travel as planned. Moreover, sporadic fighting between government troops and SPLA in the South jeopardised such ambitions (Personal communication with Mr Ajan, a former soldier with SPLA, Khartoum 2008). Other challenges such as capacity and resources were also barriers to returning home (Malik 2005:32).

Kälin (2005:41) a representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, undertook a mission to evaluate the situation of returnees to Southern Sudan. He found that displaced persons were not informed about the situation in their places of origin. For example, most of them had unrealistic expectations regarding social services and livelihood opportunities. Moreover, some returnees had been attacked and looted on their way back home. After arrival many remained without shelter, food and clean water. They also felt unsafe due to militia activities, land mines and the presence of armed activities. Therefore as Verney argues (2010, online) some returnees had to go back to their displacement sites, such as the capital, proving that displacement was not yet a thing of the past.

Nevertheless, the long return process to Southern Sudan continued. In 2009 at least 280,000 displaced persons returned to their areas of origin. However, IOM estimates that 10% of return movements to and within Southern Sudan were unsuccessful due to a lack of basic services and livelihood opportunities. This led to secondary displacement (NRC 2010: 17). In 2009, nearly 390,000 people were newly displaced as a result of inter-ethnic fighting in Southern Sudan (NRC 2010: 15).

## Conclusion

War in Southern Sudan had a devastating impact on social, economic and environmental resources. It also destroyed people's livelihood by killing their cattle and landmining their farms.

War also had a gender impact. For example, it led to a shortage of men. This increased women's responsibilities, as many of them had to be heads of their households. It also led to mass displacement. Nevertheless, in displaced persons' camps women managed to build new roles and to be the main breadwinners and protectors of their families as well as a source of information. Moreover, women were able to build community relationships across their gender and to provide assistance to each other.

Since the CPA, many people had started returning back to their homelands hoping to live in peace and to sustain a source of livelihood. Moreover, as the country was heading for secession, a mass return to places of origin was more likely to take place. However, it is difficult to speculate on how displaced women would rebuild new livelihoods there. Therefore, further research is needed to articulate their concerns, worries, priorities and needs.

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