

South Sudanese Women at the Peace Table

Violence, Advocacy, Achievement and Beyond

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Introduction

This paper provides an insider's perspective to the role that South Sudanese women played in the High Level Revitalization Process (HLRF) that led to the September 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The first part is a raw account of the despicable acts that South Sudanese women have faced since July 2016. It then provides an overview of why women should be at the table, their advocacy, achievements and enablers. It further assesses whether South Sudan is ready for a gender-inclusive government and suggests some ways forward to enhance women's participation to pave the way for a durable peace.

Continuity is an important feature in South Sudanese women's role in peace processes, which contributes to and shapes women's participation in current peacemaking processes. South Sudanese women's participation in peacemaking at community and national level were evident in the Wunlit peace process in 1999, the Liliir Covenant,¹ and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).² In the Wunlit peace process, communities appointed delegates to the peace conference and each county was required to nominate three delegates, one of whom had to be a woman. An important gain for women's participation in that process was that issues such as women and children abduction and forced marriages were addressed. Women delegates were also signatories to the resolutions passed.³ During the CPA process, a significant gain was the 25 percent women's quota, which was later translated in the Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan (2011).⁴

Impunity – Sexual Violence and Mass Atrocities

While decades of war with Sudan cost the lives of millions of people and displaced an even greater number of people into neighboring countries as refugees, the war that erupted in July

1 Young, John 2012. *The Fate of Sudan: The Origins and Consequences of a Flawed Peace Process*. p.116

2 Itto, Anne 2006. *Peace by Piece: Addressing Sudan's Conflict*. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/sudan/guests-table-role-women-peace-processes>

3 HRW 2003. "The Wunlit Nuer-Dinka Reconciliation Process, 1999." <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/sudan1103/13.htm>

4 Zambakari, Christopher 2012. "The Role of Women in Nation-Building in South Sudan." <https://www.pambazuka.org/gender-minorities/role-women-nation-building-south-sudan>

2016 has been much more ruthless and fought with greater impunity. It has been characterized by extremely brutal accounts of mass atrocities and sexual violence committed with high levels of impunity. It must be recognized that the majority of citizens who suffered the consequence of this brutality are women and children, not sparing foreign nationals.⁵

The sexual violence inflicted on women and children⁶ portrays a disturbing picture of South Sudan to the world. In Unity State a six-year-old girl was gang-raped while elderly and disabled villagers were burnt alive in their huts.⁷ The author has personally listened to first-hand stories of victims in South Sudan and the refugee camps in Uganda. In Gudele-Juba, a suburb of the capital city for instance, armed men raped a young girl of 17 years in front of her parents; two years later she remains so traumatized, she has completely isolated herself from social interactions. Along the Juba, Lainya, Yei, Morobo, and the infamous Juba Nimule roads, properties have been looted, houses burnt down, women raped and gang-raped, killed and maimed, and their men killed in their presence. In September 2018, a woman in Agok camp in Wau, a city in northwestern South Sudan, narrated how she was brutally beaten and raped at gunpoint in Baggari (Western Bahr-el-Ghazal); by the time she arrived at Agok camp to seek medical attention, the wounds to her abdomen and hands were already septic. The conflict has separated families, resulting in many unaccompanied children loitering in the camps in Uganda without a future. In November 2018, women in the Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement, a refugee camp in northwest Uganda and one of the largest refugee settlements in the world, reported cases of suicide, psychological breakdown, and drugs and substance abuse among girls and boys.

These accounts were evident in the April 2018 UN Secretary General report on conflict-related sexual violence, which listed state actors in South Sudan among those responsible for committing acts of rape. This followed a high-level dialogue in Juba in September 2016, in which high-

level government officials articulated the need to address impunity.⁸ Both clearly indicated the deliberate failure of the military to exercise restraint and discipline. Perpetrators of grave violations remain free, and it is these armed men, some who have committed atrocities, who are rewarded with a seat at the peace table. Women, despite doing the heavy lifting of the burden of keeping families and having an essential role in building peace, only have a small space at the peace table.

Why Should Women Be at the Peace Table?

In South Sudan, similar to other parts of the world, women are largely underrepresented in peace processes. Throughout the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)-led peace process from early 2014 and the 2017 High Level Revitalization Forum (HLRF), women activists have tirelessly lobbied to be accredited to the process and called on parties to include women in their delegations. However, women activists faced entrenched opposition by some mediators and warring parties. This is not new; from the CPA days, repeated requests from civil society and women groups for formal or observer status in the negotiations were rebuffed.⁹ In 2014, before women could be granted observers status, a women's activist had to resort to an unconventional approach for women to gain access: she locked up one of the IGAD secretariat staff and threatened to harm her if the Special Envoys did not provide a guarantee of women's inclusion in the process. While this is not best practice, and although she was eventually jailed in Ethiopia and declared persona non grata, her act led to the South Sudan Women's Bloc being a signatory to the Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) in 2015.

The Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR1325)¹⁰ and the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa acknowledge women's experiences in conflict and their proactive role in building peace and preventing conflict. South Sudanese women activists equally possess skills and

5 Burke, Jason 2018. South Sudan soldiers jailed for murder and rape in hotel attack <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/06/south-sudan-soldiers-jailed-for-and-in-hotel-attack>

6 HRW 2016; South Sudan: Killings, Rapes, Looting in Juba <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/15/south-sudan-killings-rapes-looting-juba>

7 Burke, Jason 2018. South Sudan soldiers jailed for murder and rape in hotel attack <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/06/south-sudan-soldiers-jailed-for-and-in-hotel-attack>

8 UNDP, 2016. High-Level Dialogue Held in South Sudan to Address National Action Plan on Ending Impunity for Sexual and Gender-Based Violence http://www.ss.undp.org/content/south_sudan/en/home/presscenter/articles/2016/09/29/high-level-dialogue-held-in-south-sudan-to-address-national-action-plan-on-ending-impunity-for-sexual-and-gender-based-violence.html

9 Young, John 2012. The Fate of Sudan: The Origins and Consequences of a Flawed Peace Process. p.109

10 United Nations Security Council (UNSC). 2000. Landmark resolution on Women, Peace and Security. United Nations Security Council (UNSC), accessed Jan. 6th, 2019. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>.

competence that benefit peace processes. Women bring perspectives that broaden the agenda beyond powersharing negotiations, including issues such as civilian protection, accountability, reparation and in some instances de-escalate tension between the parties. Furthermore, in the context of South Sudan where more than 50 percent of the population is female, it is unjustifiable to decide on their behalf without their inputs. Participation of South Sudanese women in the peace negotiations is not merely for representation purposes or as many claim looking for positions, but to ensure that they contribute to finding solutions to the conflict. This is backed by evidence from the global study on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), which confirmed that women's strong and influential participation in peace processes and implementation of peace agreement is critical in sustaining peace.¹¹

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The Silence was Deafening and too Long – Women's Advocacy Efforts

After almost a year of silence from the region and international community since violence erupted in July 2016, IGAD launched the High Level Revitalization Process (HLRF) in June 2017.¹² During this period, as the situation degenerated and the space for civil society shrank with threats and the killings of journalists, the women of South Sudan were on advocacy missions traversing the globe from Juba to Addis Ababa, Brussels, New York and Washington. Women knew exactly what they were advocating for because they were prepared before the violence erupted; they had a strategy developed before the ARCSS (2015) was signed. The strategy had two scenarios; scenario one was what women could do if peace was agreed, and the second was what could be done when things fell apart.¹³

In October 2016, to set the stage for advocacy, Eve Organization, one of the largest women-led organization devoted to the peaceful empowerment of women in South Sudan and Uganda,¹⁴ held a peace dialogue in Nairobi to analyze whether the ARCSS (2015) was still relevant.¹⁵ This was followed by an address to the UN Security Council in October 2016¹⁶

11 Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice and Securing Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/femm/dv/unw-global-study-1325-2015_unw-global-study-1325-2015_en.pdf

12 Communique of the 31st extra-ordinary summit of Igad assembly of heads of state and government on South Sudan, <https://igad.int/communique/1575-communique-of-the-31st-extra-ordinary-summit-of-igad-assembly-of-heads-of-state-and-government-on-south-sudan>

13 South Sudan women experts' conference <http://evesouthsudan.org/>

14 EVE Organization for Women Development was established in August 13, 2005, in Sudan and in 2008 in South Sudan and 2017 in Uganda. EVE Organization's Head Office is in Juba South Sudan, with a liaison Office in Khartoum, Sudan, and a regional office in Kampala, Uganda. In South Sudan, the Organization operates in five states. Central, Eastern and Western Equatoria states, Western Bahr el Ghazal and Jongolei State. In Uganda, the organization runs projects in Kiryandongo, Rhino and Bidibidi with a possible expansion to Adjumani. These operating locations were selected based on EVE Organization's interest of engaging women mostly South Sudanese and developing a strategic stronghold to address the challenges facing women in South Sudan.

15 Is the ARCSS (2015) still relevant? <http://evesouthsudan.org/index.php/news/116-is-the-agreement-for-the-resolution-of-conflict-in-south-sudan-still-relevant>

16 NGO working Group on Women, Peace and Security <https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/resource/statementunsc-wps-open-debate-october-2016/>

and bilateral meetings on peace, justice and accountability, arms embargo and targeted sanctions. Women at different forums warned of all-out war in South Sudan if the regional and international bodies did not intervene.¹⁷ In March 2017, another statement was made at the UN Security Council¹⁸ and, between January and May 2017, women activists held several meetings, consultations and bilateral meetings at the African Union in Addis Ababa taking policymakers to task on South Sudan.¹⁹ At the national level, women organized protests marches and called on African leaders to act.²⁰ These advocacy efforts did not go unheard and contributed to the revitalization process.

South Sudanese Women at the Table and Achievements

In August 2017, prior to consultation with stakeholders, IGAD convened a workshop of 22 independent high-level South Sudanese experts in Bishoftu, Ethiopia to deliberate on a way forward in revitalizing the ARCSS.²¹ Only four of the participants were women, and among other recommendations, they advised that women be adequately represented in the revitalization process. The discussion further developed at Entebbe (Uganda) in September 2017 where the South Sudanese women activists came for a meeting on the HLRF convened by Eve Organization. This led to the birth of the South Sudan Women Coalition for Peace, eventually a signatory of the R-ARCSS. This Coalition brought together over 50 South Sudanese women organizations from within South Sudan, Kenya, Uganda and Egypt including ones representing refugee women. The Coalition opened up the space for women organizations to take part in the revitalization process as direct negotiators and as a technical support team, improving coordination between the women activists and other groups. It called for

women mediators and an increase of women in the IGAD Secretariat – leading to a number of gender experts in the IGAD Special Envoys Office and the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission.

The 2017 HLRF saw an increase in female delegates compared to the 2015 process, with women accredited as full delegates, not just as observers. At the start of the HLRF in December 2017, the number of women delegates was only 11 out of 90 participants; this increased with the start of the political negotiation in February 2018 to 23 delegates. By the end of the Addis Ababa rounds of talks in May 2018, there were 39 women delegates among 120 participants.

Initially the objectives of the HLRF were to restore a permanent ceasefire, ensure full implementation of the ARCSS, and revise realistic timelines and implementation schedules towards democratic elections at the end of the Transitional Period, but women's presence led to change of the agenda of the HLRF from reviewing timelines to opening the ARCSS for a holistic discussion. This was due to the fact that, first, the admission of the South Sudan Women's Coalition as a prominent actor in the process allowed for more seats to be allocated to the women in the different mechanisms for the implementation of the R-ARCSS, and second, the significant gains in chapter one, which included the 35 percent women's quota and the position of the vice president. These changes affected the other chapters of the R-ARCSS, which had to be opened for discussion. Other significant gains for women during the HLRF included the devolution of power to lower levels; the opening of humanitarian corridors articulated in both the cessation of hostilities and in the R-ARCSS; the protection of women, children and people with special needs; and accountability for offences of sexual violence, justice for crimes committed during wartime and reparation.

Enablers for Women Participation in the HLRF

There were factors that facilitated the participation of women in the High Level Revitalization Process (HLRF). First, at the start of the HLRF, a few women activists were invited to the process and were repeatedly reminded that they were invited in their individual capacities as women experts. However, these few women rejected being considered solely as individuals and instead insisted for more space for other women. This underscores the importance of ensuring that women who get access to the table are connected with the wider women's movement and can open up the space for more women representatives to add pressure. Numbers do

17 South Sudan at “tipping point” warns woman activist <https://news.un.org/en/audio/2016/10/618692>

18 UN Security Council Briefing on South Sudan <http://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/peacebuilder-resource-un-security-council-briefing-south-sudan-betty-sunday-march-2017/>

19 South Sudan 2013 - present <https://crisisaction.org/our-work/south-sudan/>

20 African Leaders must take action to silence the guns in South Sudan <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/oped/comment/African-Union-silence-guns-South-Sudan/434750-4638664-2o5tt7z/index.html>

21 IGAD meets in Ethiopia to revitalize South Sudan peace process <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/igad-meets-in-ethiopia-to-revitalize-south-sudan-peace-process>

matter in peace processes. In the case of the HLRF, women were able to even get in their technical support team, which acted as the support mechanism for performing analyses.

Second, prior advocacy and consultations were crucial, with advocacy working in spreading the plight of women. As a result, it was not only women calling for inclusion and pressuring the parties and mediators, but this was echoed by the region and the guarantors to the agreement. For instance, the AU Commission Chairperson, Mr. Moussa Faki, has been outspoken on South Sudan and on the rights and participation of women throughout the HLRF.

Third, with the formation of the South Sudan Women's Coalition, women from the region including the refugees were able to meet more than five times in Entebbe (Uganda) to analyze progress, review strategy, bond and get feedback from the wider fraternity, and develop documents before each phase of the talks. This enabled women to be on top of the agenda, prepare substantial feedback, and heighten advocacy and pressure around the negotiations.²² Women during the HLRF always had written submissions and this allowed for gender to be debated for the first time in a plenary for more than half-an-hour.

Fourth and most important was the flexibility of the IGAD's special envoy for South Sudan, H.E. Ambassador Dr. Ismail Wais, who acts as the chief mediator to the process. In comparison with the peace process in 2015, the special envoy was available and accessible. Women didn't relent but took full advantage of that, while he had been tough on women, he was also considerate as the submissions and argument of women were convincing.

Fifth, funding, although not sufficient, was available. Individual contributions, membership fees from the coalition and support from partners such as the Norwegian People's Aid, Cordaid, The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the Berghof Foundation, Crisis Action, Oxfam and the

Global Network of Women Peacebuilders enabled women activists to meet, travel to Addis Ababa and Khartoum, as well as access corridors in the region and globally.

Is South Sudan Ready for a Gender Inclusive Government?

The author notes that this is not a comprehensive analysis – more in-depth research might be required to dissect these factors further. However, while the vision of South Sudanese women of gender equality and an inclusive society is not so far from reach, it is being challenged by a number of factors. First are the grips of patriarchy that constantly yearn to reduce women to traditional and subordinate positions or censor them as contributors to peace. First-hand accounts from both the CPA and the HLRF suggest that women's sense

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of agency is often undermined, particularly when it comes to the implementation of agreements or articles of the constitution and policies that promote women's rights and participation. For instance, the Transitional Constitution

(amended 2015) clearly mandated government institutions to promote women's participation by at least 25 percent; however, since independence in 2011, the 25 percent women quota has not been fully implemented. This is due to a lack of political will and the patriarchal nature of noncompliance with policies that promotes women's participation. In some cases where this provision has been implemented – such as in the executive branch – it is noted that women were appointed in service-oriented institutions that resembled stereotypical traditional roles: no woman has been appointed to key ministries such as interior, finance, petroleum, defense or foreign affairs. In December 2015, when the 28 states were formed, the president appointed all male governors to the states,²³ citing that the situation was “too dangerous” for women as they might be kidnapped.

These patriarchal underpinnings surfaced during the High Level Revitalization Process (HLRF). Its undertones were portrayed through sentiments such as “spaces like these are too harsh for women to be in.” While women were able to

²² South Sudanese women demand representation on peace talks <http://www.africanews.com/2018/05/22/south-sudanese-women-demand-representation-on-peace-talks/>

²³ Gurtong, 2015. Kiir Appoints Governors Of 28 Newly Created States. <http://www.gurtong.net/ECM/Editorial/tabid/124/ctl/ArticleView/mid/519/articleId/18209/Kiir-Appoints-Governors-Of-28-Newly-Created-States.aspx>

make gains during the HLRF, it is clear that not all of the male counterparts in the process believe that women should be in these high-level spaces, although most were tolerant to avoid being tagged “the bad guy” who does not support women’s participation in the 21st century. Patriarchy resurfaced during the reconstitution of the mechanisms and institutions that oversee and monitor the implementation of the R-ARCSS. All parties to the conflict including the incumbent Transitional Government of National Unity (TGONU) fell short of fulfilling the 35 percent women’s representation in the implementation mechanisms, despite articles in the R-ARCSS requiring women’s representation at all levels, with the parties agreeing in principle to the 35 percent quota at all levels of governance.

Second is the representation of women in political parties; the HLRF was an opportunity especially for women politicians to strategically position themselves and emerge empowered from the process, but only a handful took advantage of that. Women activists were instead dominant in all the spaces and more engaged than the women politicians: it is important to note that while women activists pushed for the 35 percent women quota, this quota can only be filled by women from the political parties. Activists were on the forefront of pressuring parties to open the space for women politicians; the special envoy for South Sudan was going after parties with invitations specifically stating that out of three delegates one must be a woman. At a certain stage during the process, most parties complied, and more women politicians were seen in the process. But did they engage? Unfortunately, most of them were a “window dressing.” This act risks disempowering women and the gains already made. It can, however, be argued that some of these parties either do not have the women cadres for such a high-level process or were unwilling to invite qualified – that is, women who understand the political context and dynamics in the country, good public speakers and able to rigorously engage in a highly powered and tense space – women cadres.

This argument is not to simplify the reality and the consequences of the years of conflict on South Sudanese women. This certainly needs to be addressed through a long-term strategy. However, in a short term, there is a serious need to dispel the myth that politics is a space for men and challenge the misconception of victimhood. A vital barrier that needs breaking is the attitude of many women politicians who wait to be invited or things to be done for them. Women politicians need to be forthcoming, proactive, savvy and unapologetic in demanding their spaces.

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So, can South Sudan achieve a gender inclusive government? Since independence, South Sudan has showed interest and has been somehow positive to the idea of allowing women to participate in public life. With the quota system, the country has the potential to set records of gender-inclusive governance in the region. However, the struggle for gender equality is definitely one that will continue to encounter opposition. It is vital that despite the challenges, it can gradually be accomplished through a series of deliberate strides. The transitional period, in the event the agreement holds, provides a strategic opportunity to take advantage of short-term gains. First, it is an opportunity for women to also align themselves with the political waves of change. There is a need for a rigorous political awareness and capacity building among women to take full advantage of the quota system and the constitution review process, and to prepare for elections at the end of the transition. Second, there should be an attempt to open gender dialogue between women and men to address the concerns of both genders, and generational and cultural discrimination. This sort of dialogue can help to close gender gap. Thirdly, there is a

need for the development of a long-term strategy that will address historical marginalization that can help drive the country forward where both men and women can play key roles in catalyzing change for a gender inclusive society and a peaceful and prosperous South Sudan.

Conclusion

“Women should spend their valuable time and energy on substantial issues rather than seeking a skirt everywhere even in insignificant places.”

-A delegate of one of the parties to the HLRF to a representative of the South Sudan Women’s Coalition in Addis Ababa, April 2018.

The question is why peace negotiation meetings should be termed an insignificant place for skirts when trousers can be seen all over the same insignificant places, with decisions that affect the nation being made in some of these insignificant corners. The burden of nursing the deep wounds and scars that the conflict inflicted can no longer be addressed by only provision of psychosocial support by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and shelter by UN agencies, but its indignity needs to be brought to the political table even through unconventional ways. South Sudanese women refused to heed the model that peace can only be negotiated by belligerents. The violence did not differentiate gender – both men and women alike are affected, and women equally must be part of finding a solution.

About the Author

Rita M. Lopidia is the executive director and co-founder of EVE Organization for Women Development, South Sudan and Uganda. She has more than 10 years’ experience in gender, women, peace and security in Sudan and South Sudan. She has addressed the UNSC on several occasions on the situations of women, peace and security in South Sudan. She was nominated for the post of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association in 2018. A Rotary Peace Fellow, she holds an honors degree in applied and industrial science from the University of Juba, and two master’s degrees in human resources management and in international politics and security studies from the University of Bradford in 2016.