

# Gendering War and Peace in South Sudan: The Elision and Emergence of Women

Caroline Faria

The independence of South Sudan on July 9<sup>th</sup> marked both the end of a long history of struggle and the beginning of a period of extraordinary political and socio-cultural tumult and promise. Women have played a vibrant and significant, yet too often forgotten, role in the journey towards peace and independence. They are also deeply engaged in the development of the new Republic. Speaking in 2008 on the post-referendum era, the words of the Governor of Equatoria State powerfully highlight the gendering of this political moment. “Women,” she said, “we are the ones we have been waiting for.”<sup>1</sup>

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Caroline Faria is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies at Florida International University. Her work examines the intersections of gender and nationalism in the Sudanese context with a focus on South Sudan transnational feminist organizing and South Sudanese popular culture. Recent publications include work on young men, masculinity and South Sudanese nationalism (2012) in *Gender, Place and Culture*; the politics of the Miss South Sudan beauty pageant (2010) in *The International Feminist Journal of Politics*; and on South Sudanese transnational feminism with her co-author Jennifer Erickson (2011) in *Signs: a Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Most recently her work has focused on the emergence of the beauty industry in the new Republic of South Sudan.

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<sup>1</sup> Her Excellency (H.E.) Jemma Nuna Kumba, speech at a conference on women’s empowerment and political participation, Juba, Sudan 18 August 2008.

The desire to engage women is evident within the new Government of South Sudan, civil society leaders, and international development organizations. Each has promoted women as central to the creation of a peaceful and strong nation-state. With women representing sixty percent of the population of the South, the Government has carefully sought to mobilize their support. Bi- and multi-lateral organizations have also targeted women with funding to conduct referendum literacy efforts and to support them in their own political campaigns. And women themselves have been organizing, leading, funding and participating in large conferences, meetings and projects on women’s political participation. Those in the Sudanese diaspora have also been deeply involved - closely monitoring the referendum process for any delays or violations and actively lobbying the US Government to maintain pressure for a peaceful and timely vote. In these and many other ways, women have become increasingly visible in this nationalist moment. However, their engagement did not begin in the post-conflict era, but has always been a central, if elided, part of the resistance movement.

## Gendering War: Women’s Resistance during the Conflict

To speak of ‘women’ in South Sudan is both a challenging and strategic move. South Sudanese women come from a diverse range of ethnic-regional, religious, and linguistic communities. These differences have made organizing as “Women” and around gender equality an ongoing struggle. And yet as we embark on South Sudanese independence, recognizing both the past and ongoing contributions of women to peace in the

South, and the significant and ongoing challenges faced by them today, is a vital project. Feminist theorists have considered women's political subjectivity during conflict, seeking to uncover the often unrecognized, marginalized, or privatized acts and spaces of women's resistance and struggle (see for example Enloe 1983, 2000; Yuval-Davis 1997; Dowler 1998, 2001; Giles 2003). Such work highlights how conflict at the regional, national or international scales can serve to stifle or enable women's political activism, and indeed their recognition as political subjects by state and society. Central here is a concern with the tensions between nationalist and feminist efforts and the tendency for women to be included, even centered, in resistance efforts only to be sidelined following independence (Bernal 2001; Oduol and Kabira 1995).

As is common in narratives of women and war, Southern Sudanese women have often been positioned as victims, iconic symbols of threatened cultural, ethnic and regional heritage or, through accounts of slavery and state sanctioned rape for example, as the battleground for conflict. In this way, they have formed part of the literal and metaphorical territory over which the war has been fought (Ringera 2007, Beswick 2000, Aldehaib 2010). Constructed in this way, Southern Sudanese women have been intimately evoked in efforts to produce and defend a shifting notion of the ever-imminent South Sudanese nation. However, women have also actively participated in the struggle for land, resources, greater autonomy and recognition – efforts that have reworked norms around political subjectivity and the acceptable role of women (Beswick 2000). For example, although published accounts of their participation during the first civil war (1955-1973) are rare, South Sudanese women challenged Government oppression during this period through public protests, by secretly sheltering soldiers and war victims, undertaking very dangerous work as messengers or decoys for the guerilla movement, and facilitating efforts towards peace in the South whilst based in countries of transition or resettlement (Fitzgerald 2002; personal communication interviews 7 June, 8

August 2011). During the second civil war (1983-2005), the leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), John Garang, sought more formally to incorporate women into the resistance movement and they were recruited directly into the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) through the Women's Battalion, which was formed in 1984. Women were officially represented in the movement through the SPLM/A's Secretariat for Women, Gender and Child Welfare and the Department for Women's Affairs (later Family Affairs), which held workshops and conferences on women's rights and empowerment from 1994 onwards, and throughout the conflict (Fitzgerald 2002) and which relied on women activists to undertake much of this work.

During both conflicts, women were heavily relied upon to support their families and communities, frequently taking on many responsibilities traditionally undertaken by men in order to do so (Fitzgerald 2002; Ringera 2007; Aldehaib 2010). This work became more formalized at the 'grassroots' in SPLM areas through associations, cooperatives and women's groups and at a more centralized level through the Southern Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA). This organization included women, albeit in restricted ways, in their operations.<sup>2</sup> Civilians and women in particular were also implicitly expected to provide the SPLM battalions with food, shelter and water. These contributions were of vital importance to the movement though they remain under-valued when compared with the more glorified contribution of military combat (Jok 1999; Ringera 2007; elsewhere, see Enloe 2000).

## The Elision of Women

Although South Sudanese women were active in varied ways in the resistance movement, they were

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<sup>2</sup> For example, all the family coordinators in the SRRA were women and the organization had a sector on Gender and Development, headed by a woman (Fitzgerald 2002).

often excluded from key positions of military and political power and marginalized within the formal structures of the SPLM (Fitzgerald 2002; Ringera 2007). So too were women sidelined in the formal peace process. Here, the exclusion of women occurred explicitly, for example with the removal of all six women initially involved in the 2002 negotiations (Palmberg 2004; Deng, 09/2004). It has also occurred more implicitly by the exclusion of civil society groups and non-governmental organizations working on issues of peace and nation building in Southern Sudan. These groups tended to have a greater proportion of women represented on their boards and on their staff and were more likely to focus on the issues of gender equality and women's rights (Palmberg 2004; IRIN, 10/ 2006). The power sharing formula used for the creation of the transitional Government of Southern Sudan and the various related commissions developed to implement the peace agreement have also only included political parties, with few women sitting on these commissions and no involvement of civil society organizations.<sup>3</sup>

This lack of representation is reflected in the power held traditionally by women in the formal political system of the Republic of Sudan as a whole (Beswick 2000). In 2003, within the unified nation of Sudan, only four out of one hundred people admitted to the country's judiciary were women. At this time they formed six percent of the judges in Sudan's High Court and twenty six percent of the judges in the general court. By 2006 there were only two female ministers in the Ministry of Social

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<sup>3</sup> Initially no women sat on these commissions. However, at the gender symposium of the Oslo donor conference for the reconstruction of the New Sudan the political parties involved in the process were pressured to include more women. By 2005, six to seven women sat on one of the most important of these, the Constitutional Review Committee (CRC) (IRIN 10/2006). This committee has 24 seats in total and has also been the subject of other critiques about representation along ethnic lines.

Welfare and Social Development and in the Ministry of International Cooperation, with no significant representation in strategic ministries such as Foreign Affairs, Defense or Finance (IRIN, 10/ 2006). A similar pattern of under representation is evident in the formation of the new government of South Sudan where twenty five percent of new seats have been formally allocated for women – though the quota remains unfilled. In the South, as in the North, ethnic, class based and marital privileges often shape which women are positioned in these roles. So too has language emerged in the South as an important factor shaping women's inclusion. Those women educated in English in East Africa have distinct advantages in the new Government of South Sudan where the majority of business is conducted in English. In the post-conflict era, language has thus joined ethnicity, religion, educational status and class in determining women's access to power. As women in the South have been historically marginalized in terms of education, and carry a disproportionate burden of care for family and community, they face increased challenges today in running successfully for political office or finding employment in the formal sphere.

## Inclusion through Civil Society

Given the history of marginalization, women have found that work in civil society offers avenues to advance, to contribute to the development of the South, and to challenge the direction of political organizations like the SPLM. These grassroots organizations have provided a more inclusive space to promote gender equality alongside respect for ethnic and religious difference.

As members of civil society groups, women have demonstrated their political activism most commonly through peace-work. This is due in part to their marginalization in formal negotiations for peace between high-level South Sudanese political leaders and in part to the essentialist assumptions that women are natural peacemakers – an idea that

can facilitate their inclusion in such efforts.<sup>4</sup> During periods of intense, ethnic violence within the SPLM in the 1990s, women were prominently involved in grassroots peace-building initiatives. For example, Awut Deng, one of the founders of the Sudan Women's Association in Nairobi in 1993, helped to develop and coordinate the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) "people to people" peace process. This was a grassroots effort to heal internal conflicts within the southern Sudan following the 1991 split of the SPLM/A. In the absence of such attempts within the political and military branches of the SPLM/A to resolve the conflict peacefully, the NSCC process brought together eight hundred delegates representing women, youth, elders, traditional leaders, spiritual leaders and members of the church and led to the signing of the Wunlit peace agreement in 1999. A key part of this effort was the mandate that one third of the participants be women. The process was extended to the US-based diaspora where women also participated in meetings in churches in the D.C area (interview August 2008).

Another early example of women's contributions through civil society occurred in 1994, in Chukudum at a women's conference for civic groups. Over seven hundred women leaders and grassroots organization members attended an event coordinated by the SPLA. This was a significant moment for Southern Sudanese civil society – seen as one of the first times the military institution recognized the role of civil society and made attempts to co-ordinate its own operations with those of civilian groups. It also provided a valuable opportunity for civic groups to network and

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in 2002, all six women initially involved directly in peace negotiations were removed and implementing commissions included very few women. Civil society groups and non-governmental organizations, which often have a greater representation of women and more commonly focus on the issues of gender equality, were also excluded from the process (Palmberg 2004).

coordinate amongst themselves. Since then a number of women's organizations, and civil society groups with a significant majority of women in leadership have emerged, including the Sudan Women's Voice for Peace, the Sudanese Women's Union, the SPLM Women's League, the New Sudan Women's Federation, and the Sudan Women's Association.<sup>5</sup> Representatives of Sudanese women in civil society began over the last decade to participate actively in a number of international conferences working for women's empowerment and inclusion in political decision-making and peace negotiations (personal communication with H.E Kiden 17 August 2008). These included the Beijing Conference in 1995, the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies conference of 2000 and the Sudan National Women's Convention in Uganda in 2002.

### Gendering Peace: Post-conflict Shifts

Although the signing of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement was widely welcomed in the South, it was also criticized for excluding women political leaders and civil society more generally where, as highlighted above, women have been better represented (Ringera 2007; Aldehaib 2010). This problem of women's representation mirrors the history of women's marginalization in Sudanese politics. However the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) has marked a shift in women's engagement within formal political structures and the peace and reconstruction process. Though much of the CPA focuses on power sharing in terms of governance and the formal political sphere, there is also an emphasis on social justice and both ethnic and gender equality. Now, recognition of the equal rights of men and women is

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<sup>5</sup> Others include the Sudan Women's Empowerment for Peace, the Sudan Council of Churches and the New Sudan Council of Churches, Women's Action Group, Nuba Women's Peace Group, Nuba Women's Group and the Nuba Relief, Rehabilitation and Development Society (Ringera 2007).

formally included in the Machakos Protocol (section 1.6.2.16<sup>6</sup>) and a number of new laws protecting the legal rights of women have been introduced, including the oft-cited twenty five percent reserve for women in political office (Aldehaib 2010).

Institutionalized support for women's rights and equality has been mirrored and indeed promoted by increasing pressure from the international development industry to include women and issues of gender equality in nation-building efforts and within negotiations for peace. These have most notably included the emphasis upon and funding of development efforts centering gender equality as part of the Millennium Development Goals and the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. This resolution calls for member states to acknowledge the unique impact of war on women and the importance of women's participation in peace and security negotiations<sup>7</sup>. In April 2006, demands for increased women's participation in the reconstruction process were also voiced at the Oslo donor conference for the reconstruction of the New Sudan. This demonstrated a powerful show of support for issues of gender equality given the scale

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<sup>6</sup> 1.6.2.16 reads "Equal Rights of Men and Women (a) The equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights set forth in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and all economic, social, and cultural rights set forth in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights shall be ensured" (Draft Constitution March 2005; SouthSudanNation.com March 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Passed on October 31<sup>st</sup> 2000, this Security Council resolution acknowledged the unique impact of war on women and the importance of women's participation in peace and security negotiations. In particular it urges countries to prosecute crimes against women, provide extra protection of girls and women in war zones, appoint more women for peace keeping operations, and involve more women in negotiations, peace talks and reconstruction planning (PeaceWomen.org, October 2006).

of funding flowing into the country for reconstruction from the international donors present at the conference (IRIN, 10/2006). Indeed, the discourse emerging around the reconstruction of South Sudan clearly demonstrates support within the international community for efforts to address gender inequality and to improve the representation of women in the peace and nation building process. This mirrors a tendency exemplified more broadly in development discourse and practice (Sharma 2008), in which women have increasingly been viewed both as ideal objects for improvement and as ideal tools for the broader development of the new nation. These gestures have been supported by an increase in funding and administrative support from international donors for civil society groups working to improve women's participation in nation-building efforts and to promote gender equality in the New Sudan. However, challenges remain in bridging the inequalities *amongst* women of differing ethnic, class- based, linguistic and educational backgrounds, a topic rarely discussed in public discourse but a key challenge to building unity at the grassroots. These challenges mirror broader inequalities within the South between ethnic groups and across class that shape access to political power and that remain highly contentious (see Erickson and Faria 2011).

In part because of these changes, women have become more active in South Sudanese politics. A number of women who were involved in the peace and reconstruction efforts as well as the women's rights movement, now hold office within the new Government of South Sudan. In addition, women-centered and women-led civil society groups are beginning to receive greater financial and logistical support from the new Government at the ministry and regional scales. The efforts of new community based organizations (CBOs) registered in South Sudan speak to the greater stability of the country as it enters a post-conflict period of reconstruction and development. Larger international development institutions and organizations such as the varied branches of the United Nations, Mercy Corps, OXFAM and Save the Children are shifting from a

focus on humanitarian relief to more long term and sustainable approaches (interview July 2008) in which funds from larger international NGOs are channeled to 'grassroots', often women-led, CBOs who act as implementers. Although capacity remains limited, CBOs are being trained and positioned as service providers for a wide-range of needs including HIV/AIDS education, adult illiteracy, democracy-building and small business enterprise trainings. The new peace has also provided greater possibilities for assistance and connection with South Sudanese organizations in the diaspora (interview July 2008). Greater political stability, new access to international resources, and governmental encouragement of civil society has led such groups to flourish (Ringera 2007; interview August 2008). This marks a significant shift in the support and presence of women-led and women-centered community based organizations and an increasingly visible example of women as political subjects and leaders in the new South Sudan.

## Towards a Feminist Nationalism in South Sudan?

The post-conflict period has thus seen a flourishing of civil society in South Sudan opening up many new spaces for women's political and social engagement and activism. Again, this is in part due to the growing recognition in political circles of the need to support and rely upon women in the post-conflict era of development as well as the emphasis placed on women as ideal objects of, and for, development by international donor agencies. Undoubtedly though, women themselves have embraced the new spaces of opportunity in civil society and in the formal political sphere to participate in shaping a new South Sudan. Part of the challenge for those women promoting gender equality and women's rights is the extent to which these goals can be fought for alongside, and as part of, a broader nationalist ethos of development. The work of one emerging women's group in the South highlights how this path remains a complicated one to take.

First formed in 2005, the South Sudan Women's Empowerment Network (SSWEN) was among those new civil society organizations registered at the Ministry of Welfare in South Sudan after the signing of the CPA. Created primarily by Sudanese women in the United States-based diaspora to serve Sudanese women living there, the group chose to expand its work to South Sudan at the end of the conflict. SSWEN's entry point to work in the South was a conference in Juba in 2008 (described in detail in Erickson and Faria 2011), which was attended by a diverse range of women from across the ten regions of the South as well as Darfur and Southerners based in Khartoum. One of the key goals for the conference was to provide a space for women from varied ethnic, class, rural-urban, language and religious backgrounds to talk about the key challenges in their lives and to articulate a vision for the future in a post-referendum South Sudan. Through workshops, discussions, and panel sessions women articulated a number of key needs, needs that women in the South (and indeed in much of the rest of the country) have long faced. These centered on education and health care, protection from violence and discrimination in the community and family, gaining gender equality in the legal and judicial realms, and promoting women in business and in the formal political system. The conference was an exciting and groundbreaking moment for those who participated, marking one of the first post-CPA organizing efforts of its size that was organized and facilitated by Sudanese women (as opposed to those promoted by international NGOs and multi-lateral donor agencies).

The conference closed with the women articulating a plan of action for their own communities when they returned home and a broader set of demands on the Sudanese state to respect women's rights and gender equality by signing the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In the months following the conference, several SSWEN chapters were created across the South; in Warrap, Western Bahr El Gazal and Central Equatoria. The fundamental challenges articulated by these women remain an everyday part

of the lives of many women and girls in Sudan. However, the work of SSWEN is part of a larger – dispersed, fragmented but nonetheless growing – movement around gender justice in South Sudan.

This kind of feminist organizing in the South has not, however, operated in isolation from nationalist efforts. Indeed women leaders within SSWEN have argued that gender equality must be a fundamental part of the shift to sustainable and peaceful sovereignty, and in turn, that without peace the challenges facing women cannot be resolved. This slippage is in part intuitive but it is also one that feminist critics of nationalism have long debated (see for example Nnaemeka 2003; Abdi 2007, Moallem 1999). Following the success of SSWEN's conference and as they prepared for independence, women leaders found they must balance carefully, and try to connect, their feminist and nationalist concerns. SSWEN leaders followed the calls of the women at the event to focus on the basic needs of health and education in the communities where they are based. However, they were also influenced by calls from Government representatives to take on voter education efforts across the United States and South Sudan in the run up to the referendum on independence. They chose to prioritize this, developing a widespread campaign to provide information on voting from the diaspora, which included education on identification requirements, election dates, and the complex rules around the process. As part of this work SSWEN members also spearheaded the formation of an umbrella network of NGOs in the United States and South Sudan working to educate individuals, community by community, in the diaspora in the run up to the referendum. Their work involved helping to run information sessions, creating informational packs, and educating individuals on where, when and how they could vote (but not what to vote for). They also chose to be part of a civic education campaign around the vote within the South itself. They worked on plans to develop voter education workshops across the South that would be open to anyone, but which would target women. In connection, they decided to develop leadership

training programs for selected women who sought to run for political seats at local, regional or national scales. SSWEN has not been alone in these efforts. They now form part of a network of groups based inside and outside of the Sudan who are working to include women in the democratic process and engage them in the nation-state building moment.

SSWEN's interest in educating women in the voting process and grooming them for political leadership was motivated by their feminist agenda for women's empowerment. However, the decision more broadly to undertake voter education in the diaspora and South Sudan was shaped by their nationalist agenda – a desire for greater autonomy and justice for the South. This marked a distinct shift in focus from an explicitly women-centered effort to a nationalist one aimed at enabling a democratic, well-informed and representative referendum vote. SSWEN leaders recognize the fraught relationship between feminist and nationalist concerns yet they have continued, with care, to pursue these goals in tandem. Following the outcome of the referendum in January 2011, SSWEN organized another large conference entitled *Mainstreaming Women's Agenda in the Post-Referendum Arrangements*. This time they collaborated both with the Government of South Sudan (through the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare) and international agencies (primarily the Institute for Inclusive Security) and brought together civil society representatives, government legislators, parliamentarians, members of the South Sudan Referendum Commission and the African Union. The conference had two main goals that exemplified their efforts to connect feminist and nationalist concerns: to improve the representation of women in post-referendum decision-making and to identify and center the “gender-specific priorities of women as they relate to the post-referendum negotiations” (SSWEN Press Release 22 February 2011). The conference participants identified four key areas for general concern but also where particular attention must be paid to the gendered dimensions: around security, citizenship, economic and natural resource access,

and international treaties and other legal issues. In particular, women called for improved transparency and accountability in the negotiations process, the appointment of more women to the negotiating teams and task forces, and the establishment of a team of gender experts to ensure that women's priorities are accounted for in the negotiation process. Recognizing that women have historically found improved opportunities for inclusion through civil society, the participants called lastly for an official mechanism for civil society groups to participate in the negotiation process (SSWEN Press Release 22 February). Reflecting their effort to connect nationalism and feminism, the public statement following the conference closes by stating, "the inclusion of Sudanese women's voices and a gender perspective will ensure post-referendum arrangements are complete and comprehensive. Most importantly, they will help ensure greater equality, including between women and men, and lasting peace. We will not rest until our voices are heard!"

In these early days of autonomy, women thus represent a valuable resource for the Government of South Sudan and others seeking to build a strong and politically sustainable nation-state. However, although women's groups such as SSWEN have flourished since the signing of the peace agreement in 2005 they have had to balance both feminist and nationalist struggles. This continues to be a difficult path. History has shown that women are too often made subservient to nationalist interests and in many cases are promised equality only once the struggle for independence is attained. Indeed, in many nationalist movements, women's rights and women's equality have been deferred or silenced following independence. Yet in South Sudan we see the promise of a more sustainable feminist nationalism. This is reflected in part by women's growing political voice, the important involvement of women in the referendum process, and the centering of women's empowerment in government and non-governmental development discourse. In this new moment, women will undoubtedly play an important role in directing the post-conflict

direction of the new country. It remains to be seen whether their work becomes subsumed into the nationalist project and their project for women's rights and gender equality marginalized. Alternatively, and hopefully, we may see feminist efforts such as those promoted by SSWEN recognized as a central part of the nationalist project to build a new and just South Sudan.

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