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Original Research Article

JAAS

Journal of Asian and African Studies
1–14
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DOI: 10.1177/00219096221106076
journals.sagepub.com/home/jas
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The Cultural Problematic in Narratives of Violence against Women and Girls in South Sudan

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Abstract

Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is endemic in South Sudan. Approaches to end VAWG are barely making a dent in prevalence figures. Global evidence tells us that ending VAWG in conflict-ridden contexts is challenging on many levels. Our research points to the need for social and gender norm change approaches to be better contextualised within the political economy and through applying a nuanced critique of the role of culture in normalising many forms of VAWG. In addition, greater involvement of young people is critical as a behavioural tipping point is beginning to emerge in this group. At national level, a lack of political commitment emerges as a key challenge in ending VAWG. Drawing on the findings from 20 qualitative interviews with national civil society organisation (CSO) and non-governmental organisation's (NGO) stakeholders, the article argues that current approaches to ending VAWG in South Sudan (and arguably elsewhere) must be reframed along a continuum of change. Activities must be supported at all levels from national through to the grassroots and be founded in a complex picture of the values and beliefs that sustain VAWG.

Keywords

Gender, violence, South Sudan, culture, development

Introduction

This article presents a situational analysis of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in South Sudan. This includes a detailed summary of the available data on prevalence and a review of

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research seeking to understand why violence occurs. The article draws on 20 qualitative interviews with actors working for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) or National Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (as opposed to International NGOs (INGOs)). Focus on this group is specifically always for more nuanced insights into the complexities of working to end VAWG in a fragile context. Arguably, national-level stakeholders have much more of a deep-rooted historical perspective on why violence persists which is shaped, in part at least, by their personal identities as members of local communities. Their cultural and social positioning coupled with professional roles as stakeholders make their viewpoints potentially rich and valuable. Their 'local' knowledge is more critical than ever as we struggle to understand why we are unable to bring about gendered transformation. It has been commented many times by post-development theorists that local knowledge and insights are often devalued and ignored by international organisations. This article represents an attempt to bring these critical voices more centrally in the discussion on what works best to end VAWG in South Sudan. Before going further into the critical analysis, we need to map out what we know of the prevalence levels of different forms of VAWG in South Sudan.

Since attaining its independence on 9 July 2011, South Sudan represents one of the world's most acute humanitarian situations with the estimated 1.6 million people being internally displaced from their homes, and 2.28 million being South Sudanese refugees as of September 2021 (Reliefweb). VAWG is pervasive throughout the country. Although the full extent of sexual violence is not known, nearly 25% of documented incidents of conflict-related sexual violence affect children. Ellsberg et al. (2020) conducted the first prevalence survey in South Sudan and found that out of the 2244 women between the ages of 15 and 64 they interviewed, 50% (in the Juba PoCs) to 65% (in Juba and Rumbek) had experienced either physical or sexual violence from a partner or non-partner in the course of their lifetimes.

> Approximately 35% of respondents had experienced rape, attempted rape or other forms of sexual violence by a non-partner during their lifetime. For ever-partnered women, lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual partner violence ranged between 54% in the Juba PoCs and 73% in Rumbek. (Ellsberg et al., 2020: 1)

The underlying root cause of violence is gender inequality which in conflict settings intensifies (Standing et al., 2016). According to the 'One Campaign', South Sudan has the worst indicators for girls' education in the world (https://www.one.org/africa/about/). 73% of girls in South Sudan do not go to primary school. Not only are they less likely to enter school, girls are also more likely to drop out compared to boys with nearly three-quarters of school-age girls out of the classroom. Girls out of school are at higher risk of exploitation, abuse and neglect and violence, such as rape and child marriage. A lack of girl-friendly schools with few female teachers (only 12% country wide)deepens feelings of insecurity in a place that should be safe for them (https://borgenproject.org/top-10-facts-about-girls-education-in-south-sudan/). This summary of context clearly highlights the urgent need to build the evidence base on the multiple triggers for VAWG and what works best to end it. Given that ending VAWG has risen in priority for donors, the ongoing high levels of VAWG in South Sudan calls for a critical review of the impact and effectiveness of INGO and NGO's efforts. With that in mind, this article hopes to contribute to developing a more complex picture of why VAWG happens by drawing more closely on the insights of national actors working for organisations committed to seeing this change happen.

The interviews conducted give us a complex picture of three discourses applied, often simultaneously in the narratives given by our participants. First, a 'patriarchal cultural discourse' which, for some development stakeholders, shapes the lens through which they see and view violence. This lens argues that violence happens when women push against the cultural norms of female modesty, and conformity to these norms will reduce instances of VAWG. While these stakeholders view VAWG as wrong, they do not frame it as an issue linked to patriarchy. In contrast, the arguably westernised and feminist language of gender norm change has clearly influenced internationally funded interventions to end VAWG. Donors fund programmes designed to challenge the underlying patriarchal norms known to generate the structural inequalities that underlie multiple forms of violence. The nature of this programming, in the perceptions of those we interviewed, focuses heavily on workshops geared to transforming harmful practices and behaviours. All our participants had attended many such workshops and it was clear they understood how donors expected VAWG projects to be framed. Our research revealed that the 'workshoptisation' of VAWG can mask the multifaceted perceptions of gender that national NGO stakeholders hold at a personal level. A third discourse emerges in the language and approach of stakeholders working for women-led and centred organisations. These actors combine feminist gender norm theory with a strong emphasis on cultural values and beliefs. They see aspects of culture as the underlying problematic when it comes to challenging and ending VAWG.

The emphasis on 'culture as the problem' comes through in all the interviews. Unravelling why this might be is important in attempts to measure how far attitudes are shifting in regard to gender equality. The 'culture as a problem' narrative has been heavily critiqued by feminist post-colonial figures from the late 1990s who warned against seeing VAWG in the Global South as a cultural product. It appears that much of the messaging in end VAWG workshops does, however, focus on culture as a strong force generating restrictive and harmful gendered norms. Many stakeholders describing themselves as feminist point to certain cultural practices such as bride-price as a strong factor in normalising violence (this is backed up by the findings of Ellsberg et al., 2020). Ironically, and in opposition to the culture as problem narrative, many of the national development actors we interviewed felt it was girls and women not embracing their culture that led to instances of violence. In the views of these participants, practices such as polygamy offered resilience to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and other forms of domestic abuse. This view obviously runs counter to the prevailing academic thinking, already cited, that links violence to gender inequalities enforced through practices such as polygamy and bride-price.

What we do know with certainty is that approaches to end VAWG in South Sudan are barely making a dent in prevalence figures. Global evidence tells us that ending VAWG in conflict-ridden contexts is challenging on many levels. Our research points to the need for social and gender norm change approaches to be better contextualised within the realities of the political economy in which they sit. At national level a lack of political commitment emerges as a key challenge in ending VAWG. Our data suggest that the sanctioning of extreme violence is institutionalised through political and military apparatus. We argue that current approaches to ending VAWG in South Sudan (and arguably elsewhere) must be reframed along a continuum of change that deliberately links activities at all levels from national through to the grassroots.

This article begins with a section reviewing the aid infrastructure or architecture in South Sudan, much of which still conforms to the well-critiqued neo-colonialist hierarchy. The section argues that International Donors and INGOs are influential in determining the nature and types of programmes being funded, and national stakeholders feel uneasy in posing alternative approaches. The article then goes on to consider the relevance of social and gender norm theories for understanding the prevalence and normalisation of VAWG in South Sudan. In doing so, it argues that social gendered norms must be contextualised within a political economic analysis, because ultimately norms will not transform if the outer political governance structures are not committed to change. This section then moves to a consideration of the feminist post-colonial discourses that raise concerns around the over focus on 'culture' as explanation of violence in the Global South. The data section that follows challenges some elements of the post-colonial critique by reviewing how national stakeholders position culture as the central problematic triggering VAWG. It also highlights how multiple narratives explaining the prevalence of VAWG exist uncomfortably together and need unravelling if a productive pathway to change is to be forged. The conclusion highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to ending VAWG in South Sudan which prioritises young people who remain underrepresented in programming but whose appetite for change is evident.

The architecture of aid in South Sudan

Since the last intense wave of conflict in 2016, many new national NGOs have emerged. Activities to promote gender equality and reduce VAWG are seen as a high priority by donors. As one stakeholder shared, '*most organisations have programs on GBV or programs for child protection*'. While we can see the seriousness with which VAWG is taken, evidence to demonstrate if programmes are working is slow to emerge. This is largely due to the difficulties in collecting data in such a fragile context.

The dominance of donors in shaping what happens on the ground is not new and has been the subject of significant research over the years within the post-development discourses (e.g. and to list just a few, Bebbington and Bebbington, 2001; Cammack, 2002; Matthews, 2004). Our national participants shared a common view, '*We are designing programs tailored to specific donor requirements, this is because you can only design a program based on the requirements of a specific donor and these come with specific evidence acceptable by the said donor*'. The heightened awareness of the problems of VAWG in South Sudan has resulted in more resourcing and an accompanying need for more organisations to deliver activities on the ground. In a slow growing and fragile economic setting such as South Sudan, employment in the development/humanitarian sector is reasonably secure. Monitoring data is seen as important to document what activities are taking place, but it does not necessarily generate evidence on what is working.

> *Of course, we produce our annual reports to show these activities have been happening and also testimonies from the beneficiaries that we are supporting, we provide evidence of that activities have been carried out but not if they are effective in generating change.*

Interestingly, when pushed on what they felt worked a number of participants shared accounts of how activities were working. For example, income generation schemes,

> *so when women work the money belongs to them, so at the end of the day you will find out that GBV has reduced in a way that if a woman is always asking for money from a man he may get cross and hit her, so now she has something small, and she can buy things and it's more equal and less tension occurs.*

When asked about the impact of the common activity of distributing dignity kits one participant shared,

> *We do give out dignity kits for girls, we go for follow up feedback, they testify that thank you so much for your gifts because sometimes when we are on our period we don't go to school we remain at home because of the fear of stigma which they get from boys.*

These insights once again highlight how local knowledge is critical in shaping responsive and inclusive development programming. The overriding of the nuanced understanding present in local forms of knowledge has been highlighted by critiques of development for decades (Sillitoe, 1998). It has also been argued for quite some time that local views and understanding of a context should be regarded as a critical form of evidence upon which to build programmes (Sillitoe et al., 2002). In a context such as South Sudan where data is a struggle to collect for security and logistical reasons, listening to the views and accounts of national stakeholders becomes even more important. The concern, appearing again in our research, is that the power dynamics attached to the donor relationship often makes it hard for views and insights to be freely shared between different levels of stakeholder.

Problematizing social norm change approaches

It is now widely accepted that social norms shape attitudes and behaviours because they are shared. Norms are linked to sanctions that are put in place at various levels and that operate to maintain a collective normative view or perceptions. According to norms can only change when a new norm becomes more widely adopted than an old one. Understanding what is needed to trigger the rise of new norms is far from clear. For many working in the end VAWG space, understanding these triggers has become the most critical issue (see Heise, 2011). This is because many VAWG programmes are founded on the belief (or rather the *hope*) that if we understand the causes of violence better, we can then act to end it. This Knowledge–Attitudes–Practice (KAP) strategy is focused very much on changing individual behaviours, but research has shown that this linear process simply does not materialise (see, e.g. Westoff, 1988: 225).

Shifting and transforming norms is now the focus for VAWG programming, and this means that interventions and campaigns are assessed according to how well they have shifted norms. Clearly though, this assessment is not straightforward. The research presented here highlights a difficulty in this approach in that individuals can and do change their views or can even hold multiple views at the same time. As such, evidencing that there have been clear and sustainable shifts in social norms is complex. It could be argued that we do not really yet know how to generate this evidence robustly and at scale. As highlighted above, mechanisms need to be in place to capture and listen to views and behaviours at all levels from individual through to those embedded at state institutional spheres. In seeking to better understand this link we need a more nuanced approach that considers the influence of multiple dimensions on the persistence of norms. This has to involve moving beyond just a focus on individuals to an awareness of how the wider political economic context influences power relationships and ultimately underpins gendered hierarchies that legitimise violence. Mackie's (1996) analysis of the role of sanctioning to preserve Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and foot binding showed the importance of moving beyond a focus on individual behaviours in order to consider the interdependence of decision-making processes. He argues for a greater focus on the powerful role of social sanctions and moral judgements that operate to maintain collective, dominant views which suppress individual 'positive' deviancy.[1]

We argue that in South Sudan the approach needs to go further. In a conflict setting, power not only operates at multiple levels but the sanctioning of norms are violently enforced in the most extreme ways. For example, as one stakeholder shared, *'As I said they (the government) are using rape and other forms of GBV as weapons and politicians themselves send their soldiers to do ambushes and looting*'. South Sudan is a context that clearly shows how power is exerted by those in authority in order to maintain a structure in which they benefit. Codes of behaviour and conformity exist but are enforced through the institutionalisation of state violence (Jok Madut 1999). This lack of attention to power is evident in approaches to social norm and mind-set change, which often bypass issues of institutional authority. Yet political structures of authority exist to maintain a system in which a minority male elite benefit often at the expense of many.

The many layers of violence in a context such as South Sudan also challenge the assumption that a linear set of processes is all that is needed to generate the change desired. The more likely reality is that embedded power relations will maintain ways of thinking through a complex system of violently imposed sanctions and stigma that adapts to political and economic change. Violence will only end when commitment is secured at all levels from the global, to the national and local. In the context of South Sudan, it is clear that this commitment does not yet exist at government level despite the passing of various gender equality bills. Any continuum to map social and gender norm change has to include shifts in attitudes at the level of government. It obviously cannot be assumed that if a government signs up to gender equality policies and laws this reflects shifts in the views of those in power. The reality is often very different as the passages from a number of CSO participants attest to.

> *The political environment is not conducive; it is not supporting the activities and it's not friendly to women. Recent cases of GBV such as rape during conflicts are government sanctioned – government secretly instructs its soldiers to rape women as a way of asserting their authority in formerly rebel held territories, and there are many other instances in which government perpetuate violence on women.*
>
> *The parliament is not yet constituted, and our MPs don't act on what is happening and yet this is their responsibility. There is an action plan to end GBV but there is no political will to implement it.*
>
> *The obstacle is that not every woman knows about their rights.*
>
> *In politics, women rights and support for ending GBV is purely a matter of political convenience: for instance, the 35% affirmative action for women representation was passed only to get support for the peace agreement from donors who wanted to see action to promote gender equality, but it is not being implemented. SGBV is also a delicate matter, on paper the government is commuted to ending it but its practice sit remains a big dream as top government officials are also complicit in some of the violence against women and girls.*

In a fragile context like South Sudan, the constant instability and lack of sustainable peace feed into the wider deeper web of factors that entrench violence in the lives of women and girls. While INGOs create workshop space to talk through the triggers for VAWG, there was a common view among participants that these conversations are not feeding into dialogues at a local level where change has to happen.

> *More contextualizing at local level is needed rather than more conversations in workshops every hour where people talk about the same thing over and over again and not everyone leaves understanding. More critically these conversations do not then happen outside of an urban context and with local rural women.*

Disconnects between civil society and INGO stakeholders, government and communities are evident in these reflections while solutions in terms of how to bridge them in such an insecure context are not clear, agreeing they need to be overcome is a start.

Culture as a root cause of VAWG

Common perceptions surrounding why VAWG happens potentially pose a challenge to feminist post-colonial theorists or at least call for more nuanced understanding of how certain cultural norms sanction violence. Mohanty, in her famous essay published in 1986 and then revisited in 2003, wrote that the Eurocentric lens of Western feminism failed to appreciate the linkages between localised forms of oppression and the exercising of power at multiple levels including global. The often reductionalist stance of Western feminist discourses have been critiqued for their colonialist tones and for creating narratives about the lives of women in the 'third world' that render them victims of their culture. Culture emerged as a problematic in Western feminist discourse frequently, so feminist post-colonial writers attested and painted an unhelpful picture of women in the Global South unable to realise their rights because of cultural oppression. Mohanty (2003) writes, 'cultural relativism serves as an apology for the exercise of power' (p. 24). By this she is describing a power dynamic in which Western feminists are able to maintain authority over what constitutes empowerment. They do this, so she claims, by continuing to reproduce narratives of cultural oppression that women in the 'third world' are subjected to. Narayan (1997), in a similar manner, critiqued feminist narratives that give examples of cultural practices such as dowry in India, presenting them as the root causes of violence against women. She argues that these explanations represent a form of racial imperialism. The same cultural explanations are never used to explain violence against White women living in the West. While Narayan and Mohanty made their critiques over a decade ago they still ring in the minds of those working in contexts such as South Sudan. In South Sudan, it is undeniable that cultural values and beliefs are gendered and fed into a wider ideology of power that legitimises forms of violence including some cultural practices.

Bradley (2020) highlights the ways in which anthropologists working on practices such as FGM/C can so easily fall into a trap of being accused of apologists for cultural relativism. She argues this accusation is based on a misunderstanding of the anthropological imagination in which a relativist approach is in fact an important research tool. Stepping briefly into a relativist lens allows for a careful, sensitive and close understanding of why harmful acts pervade even when they are acknowledged by many men and women as bringing pain. This insight is critical in the drive to transform the gender norms that retain violence as normative in the lives of women and girls. What our data presented below clearly points to is the need for a reframing of where and how culture is positioned in discourses on VAWG. The post-colonial critique is still important; however, we also know so much more about the complex impact of different intersectional strands. It is this weaving of different elements that create processes of exclusion and marginality that are gendered but also sustained by cultural, political and social values. Violence emerges across contexts as a mechanism for enforcing and maintaining structural inequalities.

Emphasis on the harmful impact of cultural practices as a trigger for violence was commonly shared across the stakeholders we spoke to, for example, in the following passage:

> *The reasons are in most cases tied to cultural beliefs in which women are seen as valuable commodities that can be traded for money and cattle. So, they are not seen as equal members of the household because they can be exchanged for cows or money at any time, including married women. If a married woman commits adultery, she is expected to move on to the family of the other adulterer upon him paying back money or cattle that her current husband paid. So, she is passed on to another family after cattle or money is paid without putting into consideration that she might have been raped by this person.*

What is not clear is how far the strength of the narrative 'culture as the problem' is the result of a Western feminist discourse that has arguably influenced the messaging conveyed in anti-VAWG workshops. Interestingly, and adding a layer of complexity, it is that alongside the 'harmful cultural practices' narrative a more patriarchal view was shared by some stakeholders that placed the blame for violence on young women who appear to refuse to conform to 'cultural and gendered norms'. This can be seen in the passage below shared by a participant from an NGO.

> *The approach is to create more awareness in the community and with girls themselves, we need to bring them together as girls and to be trained. You know other ladies they have contributed to the violence*

> *themselves. As I have put it earlier on the way ladies are dressing it leads to violence, when we talk about violence is something which comes abruptly, so if we train them on how to conduct themselves it will help to overcome the violence within the state, and also within the communities.*

This approach of ‘training’ young women to behave better is potentially weaving itself into approaches funded by donors.

> *We are also planning to conduct girls leadership programs to promote and end to VAWG, this is a plan now we want to share with donors so that they will be able to support this programs like the trainings so that we will bring ladies together from different areas so that we can train them on girl leadership to promote end of VAWG in the state and at the local level.*

For some stakeholders, cultural tradition can provide a degree of resilience to VAWG. In the following passage, the stakeholder reflects on how polygamy can in fact help to reduce pressure on women and instances of IPV.

> *I will speak mostly on my personal perspective. I am not encouraging polygamy but it is very important not to have extra marital affairs, so if you believe you can be satisfied by having two or three women in the house, it is better to bring them in one house than going to them secretly and to our sisters. It is better to be called a co-wife than being a single mother. So, if a man wants to marry and he is having the power and he is capable of caring about you, it should not be denied. Let him do rather than him being alone and producing many external children. It will help to ease pressures on you and make the home more peaceful.*

Research on rates of VAWG and its roots causes increasingly point to the impact of practices such as polygamy as problematic because they contribute to embedding the structural inequalities that lead to the legitimisation of violence (e.g. Beswick, 2001; Ellsberg et al., 2020; Lacey, 2013; Mubaiwa, 2020). It might make for uncomfortable reading for some feminist activists, but there is a need to stand back and reflect on why positive views on practices like polygamy exist among some NGO stakeholders. In a resource poor country with many areas hard to reach and conflict a constant threat, localised solutions may appear the most sustainable. These solutions, according to our interview data, include training girls to behave and dress in a way that will not provoke violence male attention and aggression. Also, the use of polygamy as a way of building the resilience of women by making them less vulnerable to the violent behaviour of a husband who may abandon them.

It also reflects that the social and gender norms that shape patriarchy persist supporting the view of many that destabilising misogyny must be the focus. The now widespread training unravelling the social and gender norms that underpin VAWG has had a positive impact in raising the visibility and increasing funding levels. However, gender norm change programmes exist alongside a more complex mix of narratives including patriarchal views that endorse conservative social structures. In other words, the reflections shared here may feel as if the goal of ending VAWG in South Sudan has taken two steps forward and one back. Understanding where and how different narratives into the causes of violence meet each other needs to be contextualised along a continuum of change. Change will be slow to come but the introduction of different ideas about gendered relationships and concepts of rights is certainly a key step. For now, it seems that many stakeholders see no tension in combining the languages of women’s rights and anti-VAWG speak with a patriarchal view of the world. For example, in the following passage:

> *So if you look at fighting gender-based violence, we look at various angles in society on what is happening to women that call for economic empowerment. We have seen in most cases women becoming wild ones when they are earning economically, they start saying why should I respect a man. Earning an income as*

> *a woman should not mean you disrespect a man; you still need a man. The deal behind economic empowerment is to stabilize families but not to destroy families*.

Another participant gave the following view of why gender inequality exists:

> *Get a lady from Wau today, they still believe that it is the work of a husband to do everything. As a result, they make men more superior because if a man does everything he feels more superior. One thing that our sisters should do is that if a man does everything for you, you are already his slave*.

In applying a continuum of change, we might place this viewpoint at a critical tipping point that clearly acknowledges a power imbalance and the need to transform relationships between men and women but perhaps does not go as far as to recognise the barriers to change women and men face.

In contrast, stakeholders who work in specialist organisations focused specifically on promoting gender equality express a more historically grounded view:

> *We have a lot of barriers to change, in Africa, women have two offices in the kitchen and maternity room and have no space in leadership. The SPLM when it started in 1983 didn't understand the value of women, until 1994 when they came to realise that women were important contributing 65% to the independence of South Sudan. Women were left behind doing farming, they were taking care of children, they were talking care of themselves, they would make food and dry it up and sell it to the fighting forces on the front line. They also prepared nuts, and peas, tobacco and alcohol and gave to men on the front line. Although they realised that women were more important there was no political will to implement it fully. When we came to the current revitalized peace agreement, there was no political will. Lack of political will at government level is one of the barriers to gender equality.*

It is worth noting that the role women have played in the liberation and peace building movement and the strength displayed coping with the hard economic and food insecure realities of war are well documented but do not often frame the gender equality discourse in South Sudan (Mustafa Ali, 2011; Westendorf, 2018).

The role of women's organisations

The viewpoints given by those working for women's organisations offer a balanced view weaving between narratives on VAWG. Our participants were very clear in the centrality of certain cultural values as underlying factors behind VAWG.

> *Culture is a tool to commit gender-based violence against women and it has been a consistent barrier to equality. The other thing is the lack of accountability even in instances where you know the law says an act is illegal when you seek justice in such space, a lot of the time you don't get. We are dealing with people who are applying laws from a cultural mind-set which means women are blamed despite the law. Positively women have started to speak up more about the violence against them*.

The cultural narrative given by stakeholders working in women's organisations is nuanced linking patriarchy and culture. For example, '*Culture feeds norms where women are not allowed to speak, Shyness among girls. There is not enough space given to girls to speak it is not in our culture to give them this space*'. This stakeholder goes further:

> *Women are not allowed to eat chicken; they are not allowed to sit where men are seated. For instance, a place where Monyiemiji (youth in native Lotuko) gather and sit, women are not allowed to go there yet this where they make decisions. Education or the lack of it as well is another barrier*.

Similarly, another stakeholder also working for a specialist women's organisation highlights the dominance of cultural norms in shaping gender inequalities.

> *Norms and cultures. As a result of illiteracy and ignorance, people are so hell bent on maintaining these negative cultural practices. People also mistake fighting GBV for feminism, which they see as a way of taking away power from men and giving it to women. Men who have this belief, are afraid that one day the tables will turn and men will be mistreated by women as punishment for all these years women have suffered patriarchy.*

Again, in the following passage we see culture presented as a dominant trigger for VAWG:

> *Unfortunately, cultural beliefs cultivate a superiority among boys from childhood. They grow with such superiority of I do not wash cloth, I do not wash plates, I am not supposed to sweep I am the man. That is why they continue to abuse, bully and perform violence on the girl child. The barriers to ending GBV in our context are rigid cultures and traditions. These cultural traditions like forced marriage when a girl reaches or experienced her menstruation, now this girl is ready to get married parents stop caring about her going to school instead they look for a man and insist she gets married. Early marriage also happens because of poverty and also instability all act as triggers for GBV.*

As stated previously, cultural traditions exist alongside a multitude of other contextual factors and it is the way in which they weave together that leads to VAWG.

Barriers to change

Change is hampered by a variety of factors. As already alluded to above in the reflections of one participant, feminism is misunderstood as an aggressive anti-male movement. Furthermore, the end VAWG work in South Sudan seems to have found itself associated with Western feminist thinking that is taken by some South Sundanese stakeholders as problematic. The perceptions shared is that feminism is being imposed in a way that is divisive to society in South Sudan and runs counter to a unified vision of gender equality. The following passage projects this concern around the influence of feminist thinking on gender programming.

> *Feminism a new theory that has just entered our society but I don't support this theory much because of the translation that they (westerners) preach us.*
>
> *Feminism is not bad if we take it in a moderate way. Taking it in a moderate way means a woman should have a space as a man, a girl child must have equal access to education like a boy has, the woman must be paid as the man is paid if they are doing similar job at the work place. A woman should not be denied opportunities just because she is a woman but when it comes to feminism and those preaching it and the language they are putting on social media talking about the war against GBV which is seen as against men. You see we don't want GBV to be looked at like men vs women. Putting it as men verse women will not end GBV because it will make men more resistant to ending GBV.*

Another stakeholder shared,

> *Women have no choices when addressing GBV. Sometimes it's referred to as women issues but if men were involved in these campaigns, joining radio talk shows talking against GBV it would change the mind of other people but if it is only women or ladies talking about this, it will be referred to as feminist stuff.*

No, they don't see it like that because this word feminist, there are people who don't agree on that idea and they take a different perspective on that and some believe that these are women who want rule over them, and talk take like these are women who want dominate the world and take over.

The lack of clear and visible women's movement is also an urgent barrier highlighted by a number of participants. *'Female activists are there but the space is very little because of security issues some of them are fearing to talk about it and they are not visible*'.

Similarly, another stakeholder shared, '*I think there are groups of voices but I wouldn't say like there is a collective movement that represents all voices . . . I don't think we have a massive countrywide feminist movement as yet*'.

There is a danger revealed in the reflections of some participants that ending VAWG is not viewed as an urgent priority across civil society but rather viewed as a concern only for women and female-led organisations.

> *I think people look at sexual and gender-based violence in the civil society as something that women-based organisations should be focusing on I think that is the problem. I think there is a gap within civil society space and only women led and founded organizations are focusing on gender-based violence, it is not also priority within a broader civil society. If other organisations that are not women led don't see ending GBV as their responsibility then I think there is a big challenge.*

The ghettoization of gender-based violence (GBV) as a concern only for female-led organisations coupled with the view that ending it is driven by a form of feminism imposed from the outside really points to the need for the voices of South Sudanese activists to be made more audible. Ideals of inclusivity and equality may shape and motivate the work of many female and male actors in South Sudan, but as the reflections shared in this article have shown, the specific activist narratives emerging are shaped by a sensitive and contextual cultural and social reading of the gendered landscape. A landscape shaped and determined by its history of conflict and political division. Once again, the data behind this article point to the need for change to be driven by local forms of activism supported by national and international stakeholders. More thought is perhaps needed into how social and gender norm change approaches are introduced within the complex and competing web of factors that exist.

Conclusion

Through this article, we have been concerned to analyse the viewpoints of our participants according to where they are along a continuum of change. We have also argued that this continuum has to be reflective of the complexity of the context. Commonly we see views that state change is happening and there is hope that the younger generation is adopting different more gender equal attitudes. However, there is clearly a divide between rural and urban areas. End VAWG programming is more visible in urban settings and translating this work into more remote settings remains a challenge. As one participant from an NGO shared,

> *We have now reached a point where some girls at least now choose who to marry, it never used to be the case. It used to be that men were imposed on them. But this gain is mostly in urban communities as the practice of forced or imposed marriage is still rampant in rural communities where about 70% of the country's population is found.*

According to our participants, the result of the many INGO-led end VAWG workshops is that more conversations are now being had and in public. These more open discussions are an important step along the continuum of change. However, understanding or framing the root cause in relation to wider deeper gender inequalities is mostly only present in the approach of activists working for female-led organisations. The work of these organisations seems to be hampered by the wider perceptions that their viewpoints and work is influenced by a feminist politics that wants to wage a war against men. Pushing further change requires the integration of end VAWG activities within gender equality and female empowerment programming and across development sectors.

Empowerment activities seem to be having an impact in terms of opening safe spaces for girls and young women to share experiences of violence and inequalities. As one participant acknowledged, *'It will take time but now girls are talking, and they have a voice for what they went through because some girls were forced to get married. And some of them have started saying forced marriage is not okay*'.

Critically, what also emerges is the positive impact of targeting the younger generation, and this view is clear in the following insight:

> *the young generation now they are quite aware of their rights. Gender means the right of a boy, the right of a girl, they demand their rights, and they stand up for their rights, and so this is a positive attitude towards the future, and in the future maybe people will recognize, when girls know their rights, boys know their rights, and then they will say let us work together. It's very hard because of the influences of the old past cultures that we have been brought up in, but otherwise the future looks quite positive.*
>
> *So, to me I see some slight changes between the previous generation and our generation. I know change is a process especially here in our country and we need to do more to ensure that the upcoming generation will be better ours.*

Focus on engaging and harnessing this desire for change among young boys and girls together is critical. Clearly, there is appetite for change and to do things differently. Engaging boys and girls together embed a sense of what gender equality is in practice. It also perhaps helps to challenge the notion that ending VAWG is a feminist concern rather than an integrated part of what it is to live in an equal society.

The youth population is expanding dramatically; we currently have more young people in the world than ever before, and the expansion is focused in the Global South. Despite this, the VAWG agenda does not tend to focus enough on the unique needs of young women and girls, who view and experience the world differently to older generations. While it is true that many of the challenges faced by displaced youth are shared with other age groups, they are intensified by the vulnerabilities associated with younger ages. Increased exposure to intersectional forms of exploitation – especially violence – has been highlighted among a range of critical areas for these young people (Women's Refugee Council & UNHR, 2016). Comparatively, little attention has been given to female youth as a distinct group through either policy or programming routes. While research and humanitarian work to aid displaced people has increased, the inclusion of youth has not been a key focus until relatively recently. There has been a general reluctance to focus on youth in general, who are too often regarded suspiciously as potential or indeed imminent security threats (Evans et al., 2013; Hendrixson, 2004). As a result, displaced young people are not systematically consulted about the key issues affecting them. This means they can be ignored in decision-making processes, which inevitably means their interests are not well represented in humanitarian contexts. Our findings suggest a more radical and evidence-based approach is needed that departs from the current reliance on social norm change workshops. It seems to make more sense to focus in an engaged and daily way with young people whose aspirations for the future increasingly and in larger numbers align with the goals of gender equality.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. Positive deviancy refers to individuals who appear to challenge the norms of their society in a deliberate act to bring about change. The deviate from the norm but in a way that is through to bring about 'positive' change.

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