

“If You Are Born a Girl in This Crisis, You Are Born a Problem”: Patterns and Drivers of Violence Against Women and Girls in Conflict-Affected South Sudan

Violence Against Women
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Abstract

This article presents the results of a qualitative study on the context and different forms of violence committed against women and girls in South Sudan. The study documents many forms of sexual and physical violence against women and girls in South Sudan, including conflict-related sexual violence, intimate partner violence, nonpartner sexual violence, child and forced marriage, and abduction. Violence occurred during three overarching contexts: armed conflict, gender inequality, and the economic crisis. The custom of bride price, combined with the economic crisis, is a key driver of many other forms of violence.

Keywords

violence against women and girls, conflict-related sexual violence, intimate partner violence, nonpartner sexual violence, child, early and forced marriage, bride price, South Sudan

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Background

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a serious human rights violation and a significant global health and security issue. In 2013, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 35% of women globally experience sexual and/or physical intimate partner violence (IPV) or nonpartner sexual assault at some point in their lives (WHO et al., 2013). Studies suggest that sexual violence often increases in conflict settings and, in some contexts, is used as a weapon of war (Cohen, 2013; Hossain et al., 2014; Stark & Ager, 2011; Wood, 2008). Based on currently available figures, the global prevalence of sexual violence among refugees and displaced persons in complex humanitarian emergencies is 21.4% (Vu et al., 2014). However, this figure should be interpreted with caution, as the methods and definitions of violence are not comparable across studies, and underreporting of violence is pervasive (Cohen, 2013; Ellsberg et al., 2001; Wood, 2014).

Emerging evidence suggests that IPV may be even more prevalent than conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) in emergency settings (Garcia-Moreno, 2014; Murphy et al., 2019; Peterman et al., 2011; Swaine et al., 2019; WHO et al., 2013). Although evidence on the prevalence and patterns of VAWG in conflict settings is steadily growing, few studies have addressed the intersections between different forms of VAWG, including CRSV, IPV, and early and forced marriage (Boesten, 2012; Swaine, 2015; Swaine et al., 2019). Moreover, few studies have examined the range of direct and indirect drivers of VAWG in conflict, such as economic factors and restrictive gender norms and practices (Swaine, 2015). A more complex and nuanced understanding of these issues is needed to respond appropriately to the needs of survivors, to promote laws and programs to prevent VAWG, and to provide access to justice for women and girls (Cohen et al., 2013; Garcia-Moreno, 2014; Wood, 2014).

South Sudan became the world's newest nation-state in 2011, after decades of civil war with the central Government of Sudan. In December 2013, violence erupted once again, this time between the Government of South Sudan and opposition forces. Although the 2013 Crisis largely originated as a political dispute, the existing undercurrent of ethnic tensions—primarily between the Nuer and Dinka tribes—quickly rose to the surface and became a defining feature of the Crisis. Since 2013, tens of thousands have been killed, and almost three million people have been displaced from their homes. Many are currently living as refugees in neighboring countries, and more than 200,000 were forced to flee to United Nations (UN) Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites across South Sudan (Amnesty International, 2017; Cone, 2019). Many thousands continue to live in PoC sites, in precarious conditions.

Although peace agreements were signed by the parties in August 2015, and again in 2018 and 2020, there have been many delays in establishing the transitional government, and the threat of violence continues. The conflict continues to exacerbate poverty and instability throughout large parts of the country and has eroded the education and political systems and devastated the economy, leaving few institutional structures to deliver services or guarantee the rule of law (Cone, 2019). The Coronavirus pandemic has further weakened the peace process, and according to the Secretary General of the UN, in June, 2020,

South Sudan continues to be gripped by a serious humanitarian crisis. The cumulative effect of prolonged conflict, chronic vulnerability and weak essential services compounded by emerging health risks have left some 7.5 million people in need, while hunger threatens over half of the population. (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2020)

Amid this backdrop of warring political factions in South Sudan, intercommunal conflicts are another continuing source of insecurity. Such conflicts often center on localized tensions such as land for cattle grazing, accumulation of wealth (via cattle raiding), and abduction of women and girls for marriage. Many of these incidents trigger revenge attacks, killings, and rape from the victimized community, causing a perpetual cycle of revenge attacks. Intercommunal conflicts have reportedly increased in frequency and intensity during the recent crisis and famine, as families who have lost their cattle seek to regain their wealth by raiding neighboring communities.

The history of prolonged conflicts in South Sudan has been devastating for women and girls. During the Civil War, documented acts of VAWG included rape, trading of women for food or security, discriminatory and abusive practices such as “girl compensation,”¹ and forced prostitution/sexual slavery (Bubbenzer & Stern, 2012; Clancy, 2012; Jok, 2006; Lacey, 2013). A number of similar patterns of behavior are being observed in the current crisis. Currently, VAWG in the form of IPV, sexual assault and harassment, survival sex, sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) have been documented not only during acute conflict and displacement, but also in PoC sites (Clancy, 2012).

Method

This article presents the qualitative findings from a mixed-methods research initiative on VAWG conducted in South Sudan. The purpose of this component was to understand how key forms of VAWG contributed to or were exacerbated by conflict. The study also aimed to capture the attitudes of stakeholders toward the acceptability and drivers of VAWG in general, as well as the direct experiences of survivors who have been exposed to violence. The study focused on three main armed conflicts: the Sudanese Civil War, the 2013 Crisis, and intercommunal conflicts.

Data Collection

The study utilized a participatory action research approach to engage local and national stakeholders in each step of the research process. A technical advisory group (TAG) was convened with participation of key national stakeholders and experts in South Sudan, including government authorities, women-led organizations, national nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and international and UN agencies providing humanitarian assistance. The TAG approved the aims and approach of the study, helped to facilitate access to key informants, and provided insights to aid the interpretation of results.

Qualitative data were collected using focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The FGDs utilized participatory tools that have been

used for research on VAWG in other settings, including free-listing, open-ended stories, and Venn Diagrams (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). During free-listing, participants were asked to list different types of violence to which women and girls were commonly subjected. These different types of violence were written on colored sticky notes and organized according to whether the violence occurred at home or in the community and whether it was related to any of the specific conflicts (the Civil War, the 2013 Crisis, or intercommunal conflict). Participants were asked to give examples of how each type of violence might occur, who was most affected, and what the impact of this violence might be on the individual woman or girl and on the community.

FGDs and key informant interviews were carried out with individuals representing a broad cross section of social groups, including community women and men in each site; youth; community leaders and local chiefs; representatives of local, national, and international organizations; local government representatives; health service providers; and PoC camp management, among others. Respondents were purposively sampled by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) based on a list of criteria supplied by the research team.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with female survivors of violence who had received services and were identified through the gender-based violence (GBV) response staff of one of the research partners—the IRC—and who were willing to participate in the study.

The research team included international researchers and local researchers belonging to a Juba-based research organization. The local research team consisted of 10 men and women with diverse ethnic backgrounds who spoke the local languages (primarily Dinka, Nuer, or Juba Arabic) and English. These individuals were trained by the international investigators to collect and translate the information obtained. Interviews with survivors were conducted by one member of the core research team and a trained social worker from the IRC. To the extent possible, local researchers were matched by sex and ethnicity to the members of the focus groups. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in local languages or in English based on the preference of the respondents. Notes were translated into English as needed and reviewed by two local researchers.

Study Sites

Interviews and FGDs were carried out in five locations in South Sudan that have been affected by conflict: Juba City and Juba County in Central Equatoria State, Rumbek Centre in Lakes State, two PoC sites in Juba, and a PoC site in Bentiu, Unity State. All sites were affected by the Civil War and the 2013 Crisis, whereas intercommunal violence is more common in Rumbek. A total of 31 focus groups and 48 key informant interviews were conducted (including 18 interviews with survivors of violence). Approximately 500 individuals participated in the FGDs and individual interviews.

Data Coding and Analysis

FGDs and interviews were not recorded to increase the security and comfort of respondents. Detailed notes were taken in local languages for each session and translated into

English. Analysis began during data collection, with daily debriefing meetings and review of field notes. A combination of a priori and inductive coding was used to identify emerging themes and patterns from the collected transcripts. All data were coded using the qualitative software, OpenCode 4.0.

Codes and themes were reviewed in light of existing literature to identify consistencies and outliers. Triangulation between different sites and types of stakeholders was used to identify whether specific views were common among all groups or only specific individuals or groups. Peer group debriefing with members of the TAG and partner organizations was carried out to test the trustworthiness of the findings and interpretation. Exemplary quotes and key excerpts from interviews with survivors were selected to illustrate prominent themes and patterns.

Ethical and Safety Considerations

Ensuring the safety of the participants and the research team was a priority for the study at all times. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the George Washington University and the study's TAG in South Sudan. Permission to conduct the research was secured with appropriate authorities at national and local levels, including the South Sudan National Bureau of Statistics, community leaders, and PoC Camp Authorities, as relevant.

Given the security challenges of the context and the sensitive topics being discussed, special measures were taken to ensure the safety, confidentiality, and privacy of participants and researchers. The research team adhered to the WHO's Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Researching, Documenting, and Monitoring Sexual Violence in Emergencies (WHO, 2007). Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Women who experienced violence were offered referrals to services (including health, psychosocial, and legal/police). Additional detailed information on ethical measures taken during the study are published elsewhere (Contreras-Urbina, 2019).

Results

"If You Are Born a Girl in This Crisis, You Are Born a Problem"²: Patterns and Drivers of VAWG in Conflict-Affected South Sudan

The prevalence and brutality of VAWG in South Sudan are rooted in the convergence of three distinct but overlapping contexts: gender inequality, expressed by the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and practices, including child and forced marriage, which deny agency and rights to women; the prolonged history of conflict over decades, which has caused untold death and displacement affecting most members of the population; and the collapse of the economy, largely as a result of the conflict, which has brought widespread hardship and famine. Other contributing factors are the breakdown of institutions and the rule of law, which were already fragile before the 2013 Crisis; the normalization of violence; and the emotional trauma and stress caused by the conflict and economic crisis. In Figure 1, we conceptualize these relationships

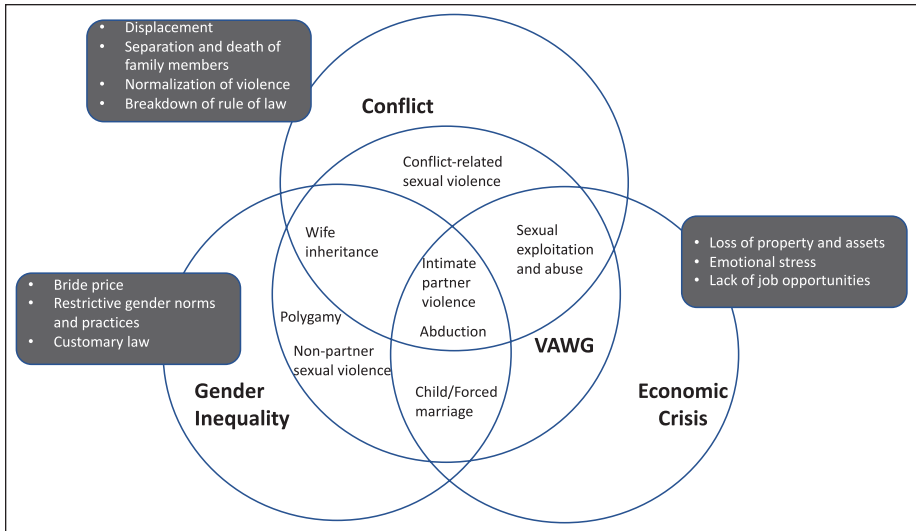


Figure 1. A conceptual framework for understanding violence against women and girls in the context of conflict, gender inequality, and economic crisis.

Note. VAWG = violence against women and girls.

as overlapping spheres, each representing a dimension of risk for VAWG. All three dimensions intersect to create the full panorama of threats that women and girls face, but there is nuance in the way that some overlapping contexts increase the risk of specific forms of VAWG. For example, whereas conflict is the primary context in which CRSV occurs, it also increases the occurrence of IPV, polygamy, and wife inheritance, as we will describe later.³ The economic crisis is largely a result of the conflicts, but together with patriarchal practices such as bride price, it creates an incentive for the surge in child and forced marriage, as well as SEA. The inability of young men to pay bride price, resulting from the economic crisis, incites further violence in the form of cattle raids and abduction of girls. The following sections of the article provide further evidence of these intersections by presenting the different forms of VAWG described by the participants in the context of the three main drivers.

“During the Crisis, Rape Was Too Much”⁴: Sexual VAWG in the Context of Armed Conflict

CRSV was recognized as a common occurrence by all participants, albeit with distinct characteristics in each site. Although some respondents mentioned incidents of rape that took place during the Civil War, most of the examples and discussion of sexual violence centered on the 2013 Crisis and intercommunal conflict. This could be because some of the younger participants did not have direct experience of the Civil War and also because the ongoing crisis overshadowed the earlier period in people’s

minds. Although it is difficult to compare the levels of violence between conflicts, many respondents reported that the 2013 Crisis is unique in the brutality it has engendered, including using mutilation and torture during targeted assaults against civilians. A female key informant in Juba noted, “Gender-based violence is taken as a tool of war in South Sudan. Women have been raped in a massive [way]. Even ten men can go and rape ten women.” An adult man from Juba explained, “During the Crisis, rape was too much! Women, girls, children and even old women were raped by men.” The brutality of the violence was described by a key informant in Juba: “Men are raping women and perpetrating dehumanizing acts on women in these areas—inserting things into private parts, cutting off organs. It is a very brutal kind of violence.” Although the 2013 Crisis began in Juba, by the time of data collection in 2015, the effects were no longer felt as keenly there. Women in Juba were most concerned about armed gangs who were terrorizing the population. For example, a young woman from Juba explained, “In Lologo, there are a group of gangs formed by boys. They normally stay in the street mocking women who are passing by . . . abusing and laughing at them.” A female key informant in Juba agreed with this: “Rape by gangs is common. They move in groups at night and if they get a lady on the street, they can rape girls. Those who did the raping are unknown people.”

The rape of women by armed actors was sometimes viewed as an opportunistic crime, as in the case of the gangs. In other cases, it was described as a strategy for terrorizing rival communities. Rape was referred to as a weapon of revenge during intercommunal violence, the 2013 Crisis, and the Civil Wars. This includes specifically targeting women and girls to draw men out of hiding and into further violence. “They rape and beat women and girls so as to punish the men and to draw the men and boys back,” explained a female key informant in Rumbek. Raping the women of a rival community is seen as a way to demoralize the community, according to a female key informant in Juba: “It’s about dignity—if you rape another man’s wife, it dehumanizes the woman and the man.” Another woman in the Juba PoC site noted, “It happens several times during the conflict; people go and attack a certain place or town and after fighting, they come and rape women.”

Women living in the PoC sites described harrowing experiences during attacks on their communities, and during displacement, carried out by armed government soldiers and opposition forces:

In 2013, my husband was killed. Government soldiers had come to take our cows. My husband refused, and they shot him in front of me and the children. We ran away to Juba. In Juba, I was living on my own with five children. In July 2016, I was attacked in my home. Two government soldiers entered my house. They beat me and raped me. I told this to the community leader where I was living, and he referred to me the PoC . . . (Woman from Juba PoC)

Although people living in the PoCs are under the protection of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), peacekeepers are not able to protect women and girls when they venture outside these spaces to farm, collect firewood, or engage in

livelihoods, and they are vulnerable to attack by armed gunmen and gangs. A woman from Bentiu PoC site explained, “When women go out at night [to the distribution point] to be the first in line, men were sleeping down and waiting for us. They surrounded us. They have guns, knives, sticks and pangas.” Another woman from Bentiu described her own experience:

When I arrived in the bush, [the perpetrator] followed me into the bush. He came up behind me, slapping me first and then kicking me. I vomited blood and became unconscious two times: in the bush and at the [PoC site] gate.

After a brief lull during 2015, fighting erupted again in July 2016, and reports of sexual violence committed by police and soldiers increased. According to a woman living in the Juba PoC sites, after July 2016, “If we go outside the PoC to get food, or if you go outside to get firewood, a military soldier may rape me, or they may be physically violent. That is happening to a lot of people.”

Women and girls also described life inside the PoC sites as being unsafe and reported that rape commonly occurred in sites such as the toilets or bath houses, or even in their own homes; for example, when a man enters the tent when others are asleep, as described by a woman in the Juba PoC site, “Rape cases are not only happening outside the camp or when going to the toilet in late hours, but it can happen anywhere when a man decides to do it.”

Although women of all ages are at risk of being raped, respondents felt that the majority of the women raped were young—some even as young as 8-year-old “Rebecca,”⁵ as described below by her mother:

When the December 2013 Crisis began, we all came to UNMISS (Juba PoC). I sell tea at “Checkpoint”⁶ and am gone from the early morning until the end of the day. Rebecca takes care of the children while I am at work. When I cooked food to bring for the children, Rebecca didn’t move normally—like both her legs were in pain. I asked her why she was moving like this, and she said it was nothing, just a pain in her leg. . . . Because she is so young, I can’t imagine that something like this has happened to her. On the third time it happened, my sister caught a man lying on Rebecca with his clothes half off. The man was a neighbor. He used to come to our house and eat with us. He told Rebecca that he would kill her and her mother and family if she reported him.

“If God Had Given Me a Boy, My Life Would Not Be Like This”⁷: VAWG in the Context of Gender Inequality

Although war has been nearly a constant presence in South Sudan for decades, for many women and girls it is overshadowed by a lifetime of suffering at the hands of male partners and family members due to gender inequitable norms and practices. According to the participants from all three sites, from the time they are born until they are married, a girl’s value is measured primarily according to the bride price that her marriage will eventually bring to her family. After marriage, a woman’s worth is primarily measured through the number of children (preferably sons) she brings to her

husband's family. The size of the bride price, most often in the form of cattle, can vary by region and has been increasing in recent years, with reports of hundreds of cows paid in some locations. In many regions of South Sudan, a man's wealth is equivalent to the number of cows he owns. Competition for desirable girls is reportedly driving up the value of the bride price, according to a male key informant from Rumbek, where the practice is particularly entrenched: "[There is] no limit, currently it is reaching up to 400 cows and is causing trouble." Another male key informant in Rumbek agreed that

The number of cows needed is many . . . but it depends on the qualities the girl has will determine how many cows to be given. Just of recently about ten men were competing for one girl in the number of cows here in Rumbek.

"It All Comes Back to the Cows"⁸: Child and Forced Marriage

Bride price is typically shared among the girl's male relatives, and the marriage prospects of the younger men in the family depend on obtaining sufficient cattle from the marriages of the girls for the payment of bride price. As a result, her extended family, and male relatives in particular, have a considerable stake in ensuring that she remains "pure" and able to secure a bride price. According to the participants, the use of violence is considered justified to protect the family's interests. For example, boys may beat their sisters for walking outside without permission (which would increase her chances of being raped and therefore "spoilt") or because they became pregnant before marriage, which would lessen or remove the family's negotiating position for a bride price. According to a female key informant in Rumbek, "Women and girls are often beaten by brother and uncles—anyone who benefits from the cows." Another key informant in Rumbek (male) recounted an experience where "one man shot his sister in the stomach because she got pregnant and he wanted cows."

The centrality of bride price as a strategy for accumulating wealth has profound implications for girls' future opportunities. Girls' education is not considered a priority for many families because it is not seen as advantageous for negotiating a higher bride price. Some parents even fear that educating their daughters might negatively affect their marriage prospects. According to a key informant in Rumbek,

Girls are restricted from education simply because their parents think that if they are taken to school, they will get spoilt and therefore will not bring the expected dowry to the family. Girls who grow up in cattle camps are expected to be married for a lot of cows.

While some respondents, particularly in the Equatorial region, noted that education could be an asset in bride price negotiation, most did not believe that the level of educational achievement would have an impact on bride price amounts. According to a female key informant in Rumbek, "Parents don't support girls' education. . . . Tall girls will be married for hundreds of cows—they get a higher dowry."⁹ For the same reason, a female key informant in Juba said that, "The father favors only boys to go to school.

The father thinks educating girls is a waste of time. Girls should be at home. They have to marry and bring a dowry for the parents.”

Traditionally, men (including fathers, uncles, male elders, and brothers) have the right to choose when and who a girl will marry, and the opinion of the girl is generally not taken into account. According to a female key informant in Rumbek, “Women and girls have no voice—uncles and fathers manage the dowry. Fourteen- and 15-year-old girls can be married off to 60-year-old men. Girls have no choice and mothers have no rights to refuse either.” In Rumbek, a young adolescent named “Helena,” who was interviewed with her mother, was taken from her home in Rumbek by her uncle at gunpoint, against her mother’s wishes. She was given to an older man in exchange for 15 cows. The uncle then used the cows to pay for his own wife’s bride price:

My uncle took me and beat me, so that I would accept the marriage. He told the man to beat me every day so I wouldn’t escape. So, the man decided to beat me and said, “Do you know why your relatives took my cows? So that you would stay here.” I said, “I am too young to marry you; I can’t do anything,” so he hit me in the head with a stick, and I collapsed. Then he removed my underwear and started to sleep with me. He held a knife to my eyes and told me that he would slaughter me. I escaped and ran back to my mother. There were injuries to my insides—it was very painful. I thought that my intestines would come out. I did not know what was happening.

Abduction of Girls for Marriage

Whereas girls may be forced to marry as a strategy for some families to acquire cattle, others may resort to violence to acquire a wife. This was frequently mentioned in Rumbek, where rival communities carry out armed attacks either to abduct girls or to obtain cattle needed for bride price. This is the source of constant fear and disruption in Rumbek, where a male key informant explained, “People who carry guns here, not soldiers, are causing more violence in our community. They are the ones raiding cattle, stealing other people’s properties, raping women and girls and creating insecurity at the borders and in bushes.”

A woman from Rumbek described how her daughter was taken from her at gunpoint by a group of armed men:

When my girl got her first period at 14, a man came and wanted to marry her. We told him “No, she is too young. She should be at least 15.” . . . Then they came back that night. . . . It was 21 men with guns, and they started to shoot and then they broke down the door. I saw that it was the same man from before, so I hid my daughter under the bed and I sat on it. They asked for the girl and I said she was not there. Then they went to the four tukuls [in the compound] to look for the girl and broke all the doors down. When they didn’t find her, they came back to where I was. They grabbed me and saw her under the bed and dragged her out. They beat us and threw us outside and started shooting again and then they took my daughter. They spent two days with her. We were looking for her everywhere, and then we found her in the bush. So, the man slept with her and damaged her.

Even if the girl manages to escape, she may still be forced to marry the abductor, as she will be perceived as “spoilt” and unable to bring in a bride price. This is the solution preferred by many families, as a traditional chief in Rumbek explained,

We are using customary law to solve cases of impregnated girls by ordering the boy to marry the girl he had impregnated. The parents are told to pay the dowry or else their son would go to prison until the girl’s parents are paid. If the boy fails to pay the dowry, we used to fine him with 1500 SSP and one heifer.

Nonpartner Sexual Violence

In addition to sexual assault by armed actors, the generalized impunity and normalization of violence through decades of conflict—and entrenched cultural patriarchal norms—emboldens community members to rape women as well. A 15-year-old girl named “Achol,” who was visiting Rumbek for the funeral of a relative was lured into a tukul by the sister of a young man and was raped by four men. She was found there later by her relatives and taken to the hospital and women and girls support center. Although her family was supportive, they still felt that she was to blame for the rape: “My auntie blames me—she says if you had not stayed [in Rumbek] this would not have happened. My mother says, ‘you should have remained in Juba.’” She considered herself fortunate because she did not get pregnant or contract a sexually transmitted infection and because she had been raped by multiple men, she would not be forced to marry any of them.

“Women Are Beaten by Their Husbands at All Times”¹⁰: IPV

Physical and psychological violence by intimate partners was consistently referred to by all participants as the most pervasive and serious form of violence that women and girls experience. Other traditional marriage practices in South Sudan, such as polygamy, wife inheritance, and “ghost” marriages, were also mentioned as practices that either had negative consequences for women or that themselves constituted acts of violence. A male traditional chief in Juba explained that “It is common in our custom to beat a woman when she has made a mistake—not to the extent of killing her completely, but to discipline her.” In contrast, views on forced sex by a partner were mixed. Many respondents felt that being forced to have sex by a husband is a “normal” practice that happens in a marriage. Many respondents did not conceptualize forced sex within the confines of marriage as violence, as explained by a man in Rumbek: “Traditionally, it is the man’s right to have sex with his wife. These cases are not reported. We consider it as intimate because of cultural norms.” A female key informant in Juba felt that “Marital rape is a ‘western concept,’” and “There is no such thing as marital rape here.” Adultery, which was defined in very broad terms by respondents,¹¹ was seen by men as a key reason for using violence against their wives. Consequently, to control women and prevent their misbehavior, men often did not allow their wives to leave the house without permission or to seek employment. A

young man in Rumbek explained, “Women are not allowed to move out of homes; if women do so, they are punished by their husband either by beating or chasing her to her family.”

If a married woman is raped, even during an attack on her village, it may be viewed as an act of adultery by her husband and the community. According to a woman in Juba County, “In case the husband heard [about the rape] and asked the wife she will totally refuse to tell the husband because he might claim the rapist knew her and it was an agreement. Then he will divorce the wife.”

If the prospect of a future bride price shapes a girl’s treatment within her birth family, the amount and circumstances of a bride price may also influence how she is treated by her husband and his family. A high bride price can be interpreted by a husband as entitlement to beat his wife and control her behavior:

Men do not care about their wife due to the dowry payment. The husbands consider high payment as purchasing—they beat their wife without valuing her because they have paid many cows. If the wife commits adultery or argues with the husband, he beats her up thoroughly—harming or killing her—thinking that the dowry he has paid will be the compensation for her death or injury. (Male key informant in Rumbek)

The exchange of cattle for wives also severely limits a woman’s ability to leave a violent relationship. If she leaves her husband and returns to her home, she may be required to repay the bride price that was given to her family, as described by a female key informant in Juba:

The payment of dowry is like controlling the woman. If you want to divorce or separate from your husband, you will pay back the dowry to your husband and you collect the cows from your relatives who distributed them among themselves during your marriage time.

The alternative to repaying the bride price could be to leave her children behind. A woman in Rumbek explained,

If the woman decides to re-marry from outside, the children stay with their relatives from the father’s side and if they are still very young the woman has the right to bring them up then later take them to their relatives when they are grown.

“He Can Even Go and Marry a New Wife”¹²: Polygamy

Polygamy is common in many parts of South Sudan, and the views of women and men regarding the practice varied. Although many men and some women described an idealized relationship between co-wives, where the first wife might act as a sister or mother to the younger wives, many women considered the practice of polygamy to be a form of punishment or even violence itself. It was mentioned in this context by a woman in the Juba PoC site, during a conversation about whether it was considered

acceptable for women to defend themselves if they are beaten by their husbands. The women in this focus group started to laugh at the notion, and one responded,

If a woman beats her husband, he can either break her arm, remove her teeth, injure or even kill the wife. They [men] have bad manners. They can even go to marry another wife without notice of the wife and just come with the new wife at home. This incident will cause heart attack to the first wife.

Another reason that a man might acquire a new wife is if the first wife has not given birth to sons or if she has done something to displease him. In the Juba PoC site, where many women are alone because their husbands are engaged in fighting, they said that the men may find a wife in the new location and do not feel the need to consult or even inform the current wife. As a woman in the Juba PoC site explained,

Sometimes women don't know that their husbands get married unless they hear from a brother-in-law or friend. [The man] might go and work in another town and decide to marry another wife there. That is what happened to me.

Polygamy often contributes to increased tensions within the household. Suspicion and distrust between husband and wives and between co-wives can lead to violence, particularly when coupled with poverty and limited resources in large households. In the Bentiu PoC site, a woman described the tensions this causes: "He will be busy with the new [wife] and will forget about the old one. If she comes to ask for money for the children, it will cause fighting with the new wife and the husband." Displacement due to the conflict has exacerbated underlying tensions in polygamous marriages, particularly in the PoC sites. Whereas, in their home communities, co-wives typically live in separate quarters within a family compound with a certain amount of independence and privacy, in the PoC or displacement sites, co-wives and their children live with their husband in the same tent. Conflicts over the distribution of water, food, and other resources are particularly frequent and intense. According to the experience of a woman in the Juba PoC site, "Before the conflict, there was no fighting between co-wives, but now there is a lot of fighting among wives because of the same room sharing." Another woman in the Juba PoC described the ongoing humiliation of living with co-wives: "Sometimes two women share one bed inside the camp with the husband. He can have sex with one wife while the other one turns her face to the wall."

"I Didn't Have a Choice"¹³: Wife Inheritance

In parts of South Sudan, after the death of a husband, a woman is forced to marry his brother or another male relative through a practice known as "wife inheritance." Many women participants referred to the practice as a form of violence, as it denies women any agency in their lives, treating them and their children as the property of men and their families. Moreover, wife inheritance puts women and their children at risk of

severe mistreatment by their in-laws. A young man from Rumbek explained the tradition in this way:

The women are inheritable when husbands pass away. The next of kin or brother of her husband takes her to be a wife without her consent. This affects most women psychologically and gives them mental illness. She may be tortured by the next of kin or her husband's brother.

Participants felt that the practice had increased as a result of the 2013 Crisis; as more men are killed through war, more women may be "inherited" by their in-laws, such as this woman from Juba PoC:

I have six children now. The 3-month-old is from my husband's brother. I was given to him after my husband's death [killed by government forces during the 2013 Crisis.] This was agreed by both of our families; I didn't have a choice. He has never stayed at home with me. We have no communication. He joined the [opposition forces] and I don't know where he is now. It's better when he isn't with me; this man is an aggressive person. (Female informant from Juba PoC)

Whereas wife inheritance is a widespread practice, the less common practice of having a "ghost wife" (or a levirate marriage) also occurs (Beswick, 2001). A ghost wife is a wife acquired by the family of a man who died before he was able to marry. She is kept by a brother of the dead man but is referred to as the deceased husband's wife. Typically, and as also noted in previous research in South Sudan, these ghost wives are not treated as "real" wives of their new husbands, and any children produced from the union are not considered children of the biological father, but rather of the deceased man (Beswick, 2001). As such, they are not given the same level of financial and social support as the other wives. According to a key informant in Rumbek,

If the older brother dies when he is very young, even a child, then the younger brother will take a wife for his dead brother. In this way, you will always be the wife of the first person who died. They don't see them as the real wife, the real family, the real children. This means they never care for their wife or children properly. There is no support for them.

"Before the Crisis We Had Little Problems. We Did Not Fight"¹⁴: VAWG in the Context of the Economic Crisis

The economic crisis and extreme poverty resulting from the conflict has increased some forms of VAWG, including IPV, child and forced marriage, abductions, and SEA. Although child and forced marriage are traditional practices in South Sudan, some participants felt that girls are being married at even younger ages than before the 2013 Crisis and the ensuing collapse of the economy. The desire to maximize or to avoid the payment of bride price is at the core of much of the violence that women and girls endure in South Sudan, particularly in the context of the most recent conflict. For

many families who lost their economic assets through conflict and subsequent displacement, marrying their girls as soon as possible is viewed as a necessary strategy to survive the crisis. In the Juba PoC site, one young man noted, “Some parents give away their daughters in marriage as a way of survival here in the camp,” and another man in the camp said, “Since the crisis broke out in Juba and spread to other states, many people lost their properties and now they force their daughters to get married so as to get wealth.” In Rumbek, participants felt that the economic crisis had led to more abductions as well; according to a woman in Rumbek: “Abduction of young girls occurs to take them as wives because men have no money or cows for dowry.”

Within the PoC sites and in Rumbek, SEA also was mentioned as a common occurrence. This was attributed to economic insecurity due to the lack of livelihood opportunities for women, coupled with either the death or deployment of the husband to the front lines, as described by a woman in Rumbek: “. . . [Women] are always in desperate need of food and other services, they are asked for sex in return.” A male key informant in Juba Country noted, “Poverty among the community among men makes some women go and sleep with another man to get something to help herself.”

Although IPV was generally viewed as a permanent feature of daily life for women and girls, most women felt that the economic and emotional stress from the current conflict had made a bad situation worse. A woman in the Bentiu PoC site described an assault by her husband:

Before the crisis we had little problems. We did not fight. But after the crisis, the problems became more. My husband started using his hand to beat me. At the time of the incident . . . my husband comes in and wakes us up. I asked him, “What do you want to say to me?” He says, “I am ready to kill you and the children here.” Then he took a finger to my eye. He hit me and removed my eye, and he pushed me down on the wall. . . . I ran to the patrol point and the officers opened the door for me and took him to detention. He stayed there for three days and then he came back home. After two days at home, he took his things and left. I have heard that he is in the PoC with some other relatives. I know my husband very well. When he comes back, he will come and find me and kill me.

Women and men gave different reasons for the increase in the frequency and brutality of IPV, but most agreed that it was related to the 2013 conflict and the ensuing economic crisis. Men blamed violence on women who were “not responsible” and not appropriately managing the limited household resources, or who would instigate “quarrels” when men could not provide for the household. Women, on the contrary, viewed violence as a consequence of men’s mistaken priorities, such as having more wives than he could manage, spending money on alcohol instead of food, or expecting her to have prepared food when he did not leave her money to buy supplies:

When a man works in a low-paid job, he can’t manage to satisfy the family with all the basic needs. The woman doesn’t consider this, and she may disturb the man every day for money. He will become annoyed and begin to fight with the wife because of poverty. (Young man in Juba)

There are always fights in the house if the husband cannot fulfil the needs at home. For instance, when a woman tries to make some demands, the husband will start beating, which is a very big violence against the woman . . . (Woman in Juba)

The impact of displacement on the lives of women and girls in PoC sites has been particularly disastrous. Residents of the PoC sites reported experiencing additional stresses compared with nondisplaced populations, such as cramped living conditions, dependence on international aid, and the loss of their material assets and social networks. This has exacerbated household stressors that were noted above as drivers of IPV and there is a general perception that IPV has increased in frequency and brutality:

This violence is more after the crisis than before because people are jobless and don't have enough food, congestion in the camps, and because many people have lost their properties. (Youth in a Juba PoC site)

The lack of privacy is especially stressful for women in the PoC sites:

If you quarrel with your husband, no one will know [before the conflict] because it's a secret of the family. But now, in their situation, they are close to the neighbors, sharing one tent and sleeping together with their daughters. To have sex is a problem because women are afraid of being seen by their daughters and neighbors, but if she refuses her husband will beat her. (Woman in Juba PoC site)

Male PoC site residents also reported feeling that they are less able to fulfill their gender roles, such as providing for their family, marrying, and owning property. They often perceive these circumstances as causing them to lose respect within their communities, which they associate with incidents of violence. According to a young man in the Juba PoC, "After the crisis, men lost all their properties, and women now don't respect them because of their poor status, which causes violence in the community."

Men's increased abuse of alcohol, which was heightened due to their lack of jobs or employment opportunities, was also cited as a trigger for violence, particularly by women. Another young man in Juba PoC explained, "Here in the camp, some men always beat their wives when they are drunk . . . this is common in both periods of peace and conflict" (Young man in Juba PoC site).

"We Are Vulnerable; We Have No One to Support Us"¹⁵: Impunity for VAWG

A recurrent theme throughout the interviews and FGDs was the lack of support services and barriers to justice for women and girls who had experienced sexual assault or IPV. Regardless of the type of violence or whether it was motivated by conflict, patriarchal practices, or economics, nearly every story ended with the same words: "nothing happened." According to the mother of a girl who was abducted by armed men in Rumbek,

The man was not arrested. The police went to find him, but he refused to come and he had a gun, so the police came back without him. They left him alone, and nothing will happen to him. . . . Our laws are not strong enough to protect people. People fight and nothing happens. This should have gone to court but nothing happened.

In the case of Achol, who was gang-raped in Rumbek, the perpetrators had been in jail for 2 months at the time of the interview, but were expected to be released after they paid a fine of 20 cows. Both the uncle who abducted Helena in Rumbek and the abusive husband who paid 15 cows for her were detained after her escape, but according to the mother, their releases were already being negotiated:

When she arrived home, she couldn't even walk. I took her to the police, and they filled out a Form 8 [a police report for GBV cases] and took her to the hospital. The man was arrested and is in prison now. The husband's brother is also in jail. They will both be set free. The uncle will pay back the cows, and the husband will pay a fine of one to two cows for mistreating the girl, but the uncle will receive the cows.

The girl and her mother lived in fear of a repeat of the ordeal:

I want my girls to go to school, but I have no power to protect them. Even if they are divorced, if the uncle does not give back the cows, then the husband can come and look for her. If he does give back the cows, then the uncle can come back and take her again.

In the case of the 8-year-old girl who was raped by a neighbor in the PoC site, the perpetrator was arrested by the UN Peacekeepers, but set free a few days later, "for lack of evidence":

I said, "What do you mean there is no evidence? Here is a paper from the hospital saying she was raped." They said he was innocent and released the man. The same day he got out, he attacked our tent and threatened us. He is still around and my children's lives are at risk.

These experiences underscore the generalized impunity that exists for rape and IPV, even within the PoC camps, as the mandate of the UN Peacekeeping Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) does not include mechanisms to provide access to justice for survivors. When asked their thoughts about how to prevent VAWG, participants offered many suggestions, including more educational opportunities for girls, economic programs for women, more services for survivors of violence, and more laws to protect them. However, women overwhelmingly agreed that an end to the conflict, which has lasted nearly 7 years, was the most important step for reducing violence against women:

Until peace comes and my husband can get a job, the problem will not be solved. (Woman in Bentiu PoC site)

For the women of South Sudan nothing will change unless our government tells people not to fight. We are vulnerable; we have no one to support us. (Mother of abducted girl in Rumbek)

Women have been organizing throughout the country for years, demanding an end to the fighting, but they feel that their voices have not been heard:

Nothing will change for the women of South Sudan. After independence, we thought it would be peaceful, but now it is worse. . . . The women of Lakes States got together in a meeting and wrote a letter to the president to ask for disarmament. We are tired of being raped. We met with the chiefs and raised our concerns. We have had no response yet. (Woman activist from Rumbek)

Discussion

Our findings paint a devastating portrait of violence suffered by women and girls in South Sudan throughout their lives, both as a result of the decades of conflict that the country has endured and the subsequent economic collapse, but also due to the patriarchal norms and practices that treat women and young girls as property that can be exchanged for other forms of property, such as cattle, and whose ownership infers absolute power over their reproductive choices, their ability to study and work, and their physical and sexual integrity. Our findings reinforce the findings of other researchers in conflict settings: that women and girls experience multiple and compounding forms of violence that are exacerbated during times of conflict (Boesten, 2012; Cohen et al., 2013; Wood, 2014).

The three key drivers mentioned above were not monolithic; in each of the sites where the study was conducted, there were nuanced variations in the types of conflict, as well as gender inequitable norms and practices, and manifestations of the economic crisis. Moreover, the three contexts intersected in distinct ways in each site, and the risks that women and girls faced changed at different moments in the life cycle.

Sexual assault by armed actors was an ever-present threat facing women and girls, both within their homes and during displacement. Women and girls living in PoC sites were particularly vulnerable to sexual violence by community members in public spaces, such as bathing areas and latrines, and in their home. Participants also described acts of SEA in the PoC sites by humanitarian actors and community leaders, who demanded sex in exchange for food and other essential supplies. In addition, women and girls who ventured outside the gates of the camps to gather firewood, seek food, or work were vulnerable to sexual assault by community members, security forces, and opposition forces, depending on the location.

Our research reveals the myriad forms of VAWG that are not directly linked to armed conflict, but may be exacerbated by it. South Sudanese society is highly patriarchal, and although specific practices vary among ethnic groups, male authority in the family and community is paramount, and women's subordination is required. The practice of bride price, and its centrality to the economic standing of families, commodifies women and ties their value to the value of cattle. The value of girls is

measured by the number of cows her marriage will bring to the family (Beswick, 2001; Bubenzer & Stern, 2012; Lacey, 2013).

Participants concurred that physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of women by their partners is by far the most common form of VAWG. It typically begins early in marriage and lasts a lifetime. The payment of bride price is interpreted by many husbands and their families as a transfer of property that confers the right to control his wife's behavior, to demand sex at any time, and to beat her when he feels she has "misbehaved." Child and forced marriage are common, and husbands are chosen by male relatives of the girl, largely based on the offer of bride price. Girls, and even their mothers, typically do not have a voice in the choice of a marriage partner. Polygamy, a very common practice in parts of South Sudan, was interpreted by many women as a punishment for not bearing sons or for displeasing their husband.

According to our findings, conflict has an indirect effect on these other forms of violence. The complete breakdown of the rule of law, the normalization of violence, and the psychological and economic stress of the war and displacement have increased both the frequency and severity of IPV. Women and girls who experienced CRSV were often blamed and subjected to additional violence by family members and husbands. Other harmful traditional practices, such as child and forced marriage, abduction, and wife inheritance, have also increased due to economic hardship and the death of husbands due to the war. It is difficult to tease out the specific drivers and impact of individual acts of VAWG, but the cumulative effect of these experiences on the women participants, on top of the horror of war and displacement, was profoundly traumatic. This is consistent with recent research that has identified gender inequality as a major driver of VAWG in conflict and postconflict settings (Bermudez et al., 2019; Boesten, 2012; Falb et al., 2020; Swaine et al., 2019).

Our findings are consistent with other research on South Sudan, including population-based and ethnographic research (Beswick, 2001; Bubenzer & Stern, 2012; Lacey, 2013). The qualitative research presented in this article informed the design of a household survey of men and women in three of the conflict-affected settings where the qualitative study was performed (Rumbek, Juba City, and Juba PoC sites). The results of the household survey, which are presented elsewhere (Ellsberg et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2020), reinforced the qualitative findings. The survey found that women and girls in South Sudan suffer some of the highest levels of physical and sexual violence in the world. Almost one third of female respondents had experienced rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault by a nonpartner during their lifetime. One in five women in Juba City and the Juba PoC sites had experienced SEA. Although the prevalence of sexual assault by nonpartners was 4 times the global average of 7%, physical and sexual assault from intimate partners was even greater. For ever-partnered women, lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual partner violence ranged between 54% in the Juba PoCs and 73% in Rumbek. This is more than double the global average for IPV (Devries et al., 2013). The findings of the study were used to develop popular communication materials that could be used by local women activists to discuss these issues in their communities (Global Women's Institute, 2017, 2020).

A strength of this study is that it covers a broad range of geographic, ethnic settings, and range of stakeholders, and it is grounded in the experiences of women who were survivors of violence. Another strength is that it addresses different types of conflict and time periods and also addresses the intersections between violence against women and violence against children, which are often studied and conceptualized as distinct phenomena (Namy et al., 2017). A limitation of the study is that it is not national in scope. Given the great diversity of South Sudan, the experiences of participants in the study site do not represent the full range of experiences of women and girls in South Sudan.

Our findings contribute to the growing evidence that CRSV is not the only or even the most common form of violence that women and girls are subjected to in the context of conflict and humanitarian crises. They also indicate both conflict and VAWG share common drivers. These findings point to the need to expand conventional conceptions of conflict-related violence as limited to sexual violence by armed actors, and embrace a more holistic definition that contextualizes sexual violence in relation to other forms of violence that also have a profound impact on the lives of women and girls. Moreover, conflict must be considered in the context of other influences on VAWG, such as gender inequality and economic constraints, which shape women's vulnerability to violence, as well as options for redress (Swaine, 2015; Swaine et al., 2019).

Conclusion

It is increasingly acknowledged that postconflict transition processes need to respond to the gendered experiences of women and girls during conflict and when seeking peace (Swaine et al., 2018, 2019). Feminist peace scholars argue that "a sustainable peace cannot be attained while violence against women remains unaddressed," and that a fulsome peace for women should be understood as "women's achievement of control over their own lives"(Swaine et al., 2019). While the numerous UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security and Sexual Violence in Conflict (UNSC, 2000, 2009, 2019) have focused the world's attention on conflict-related, non-partner sexual violence, this research adds a new dimension to the picture of VAWG in South Sudan. As South Sudan enters a precarious transitional phase of peace-building and state-building, it will be important to consider the range of women's rights concerns, including VAWG, in the efforts to achieve sustainable positive peace for all. This will require accountability and redress for all the forms of VAWG that occurred during the conflict and those that continue.

A practical recommendation emerging from these findings is that IPV should explicitly be included, as a human rights concern warranting specialized, targeted attention and programming, in donor and international humanitarian strategies, decision-making, and funding. Particular urgency should be given to addressing the needs of adolescent girls, who are frequently overlooked by current humanitarian approaches. Finally, although emergency provision of compassionate care for survivors of all forms of VAWG is critical, long-term strategies and funding must also be in place to address gender inequality, support local women's groups, and ensure

that the voices of women and girls are included in all aspects of the peace-building and state-building process.

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Author Contributions

M.E. and M.C.-U. designed the study. M.E. and M.C.-U. led the field work, with participation of M. Macrae, T.H., D.R., C.H., and A.B. M.E., M. Murphy, A.B., and M.C.-U. conducted data analysis and led the drafting of the article. All authors participated in the interpretation of the findings and final revision of the article.

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Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The George Washington University's Institutional Review Board (GWU IRB) fully approved the research protocol of the study (IRB No. 021635). Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, due both to the low literacy level of participants and

sensitivity around written consent related to the ongoing conflict. This procedure was approved by the GWU IRB and the Technical Advisory Group in South Sudan.

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Availability of Data and Materials

The data sets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Notes

1. “Girl compensation” is also known as blood compensation, a traditional cultural approach to justice in which a girl is promised to another family in compensation for the killing of one of their family members.
2. Woman in Rumbek.
3. Polygamy is included in this figure as a form of violence because it was described in these terms by many female participants. We recognize that other participants, both male and female, do not consider the practice of polygamy to be inherently violent. In this report, we use the term *polygamy*, rather than *polygyny*, as this was how key informants and community members referred to the practice of a man having multiple wives.
4. Woman in Juba.
5. All names of informants have been changed to protect their privacy.
6. Checkpoint is a village near the Jebel Kujur (the mountainous area near the Juba Protection of Civilians [PoC] site).
7. Mother of an abducted girl, Rumbek.
8. Female key informant in Rumbek.
9. The correct term for payment by the husband’s family to the bride’s family is “bride price.” “Dowry” usually refers to payments by the bride’s family to the husband. Only bride price is practiced in South Sudan; however, the terms are often used interchangeably when describing the practice in English. We have chosen to retain the word *dowry*, when textual citations are used.
10. Woman from Juba PoC.
11. The concept of adultery in South Sudan is defined as any extramarital relationship, although it generally refers to the perceived acts of women, and can even be used to describe circumstances in which a woman remarries after divorce or the death of her husband. Reportedly, there are numerous women who have been incarcerated for the crime of adultery (Clancy, 2012).
12. Woman from Juba PoC.
13. Women from Juba PoC.
14. Woman from Bentiu PoC.
15. Mother of abducted girl in Rumbek.

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Tim Hess has worked in the field of violence against women and girls for 8 years, largely within international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). He was the project director of the What Works to Prevent VAWG in Conflict and Humanitarian Crises program at IRC, under which this study was conducted.

Manuel Contreras-Urbina works at the World Bank as a Senior Social Development Specialist for Latin America and the Caribbean on GBV. He has 25 years of experience in gender and GBV research and programs. Before joining the Bank, he served as the Director of Research of the GWI at the George Washington University, as Program Officer at UN Women in Mexico and Central America, and as the coordinator of the Gender, Violence and Rights portfolio at the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). He earned a PhD in population and gender studies from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.