

# Three years too many: the impact of conflict for women and girls in South Sudan

## Recommendations for the UK government

As the civil war in South Sudan enters into its fourth year, the levels of displacement, insecurity and violence are reaching unprecedented levels. In September 2016, the number of South Sudanese sheltering in neighbouring countries surpassed the one million mark<sup>1</sup> and more than 1.73 million people are internally displaced by violence.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the displaced are women and girls, who continue to bear the brunt of the armed conflict.

Circumstances for women and girls, already dire before 2013, have deteriorated in recent years. One in five pregnant women dies in childbirth and one in three pregnant or lactating women is malnourished<sup>3</sup>. Of the children still in school, only 40% are girls; an adolescent girl in South Sudan is three times more likely to die in childbirth than to complete primary school.<sup>4</sup> Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is widespread: intimate partner violence, rape, sexual assault and exploitation, early and forced marriage and abduction continue to be reported to humanitarian agencies and other organisations. Initial analysis from the first prevalence study on VAWG in South Sudan<sup>5</sup> shows that in some areas of the country, over 70% of women have experienced sexual and/or physical intimate partner violence and one in three women have experienced some form of sexual abuse (including rape and transactional sex). Space for women's participation in formal conflict prevention and the ongoing peace process is extremely limited. The South Sudan Women's Peace Network has repeatedly called for 25% representation of women in institutional and constitutional reform processes<sup>6</sup>, but women's groups remain marginalised.

The UK committed to shifting away from 'business as usual' in South Sudan in 2013. Its contribution to peace and development has been significant, including through DFID's leadership in the field, its impending role in peacekeeping operations and as a member of the Troika, overseeing South Sudan's peace processes. In addition, as part of the High Level Review of Women, Peace and Security (WPS)<sup>7</sup>, the UK made eight, global commitments on WPS a year ago – many of which apply to South Sudan. Despite these commitments, it seems that 'business as usual' persists for women and girls in South Sudan where their situation has surpassed critical levels. More is needed from the international community to achieve safety, protection, empowerment and long-lasting peace for women and girls in South Sudan, and the UK network Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) calls on the UK government to take a leading role in a concerted push for lasting change.

In line with its commitments to WPS, we urge the UK government to immediately undertake the following:

1. **Support an inclusive peace process** with space for women's groups and civil society to participate in decision making at all levels. As a signatory to the August 2015 peace agreement, the UK should recognise and protect space for the vital role that women's groups and civil society organisations (CSOs) are playing in South Sudan as first-responders, service providers and the crucial part they will play in rebuilding South Sudan.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR data sharing portal, <http://data.unhcr.org/SouthSudan/regional.php>.

<sup>2</sup> UN OCHA, Humanitarian snapshot, September 2016,

[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/south\\_sudan\\_humanitarian\\_snapshot\\_20161029.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/south_sudan_humanitarian_snapshot_20161029.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> UN OCHA, Humanitarian needs overview, November 2015,

[http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2016\\_HNO\\_South%20Sudan.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2016_HNO_South%20Sudan.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Global Women's Institute at George Washington University, IRC, CARE and Forcier consulting. Part of *the What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls* research programme, funded by the UK Department for International Development. Findings based on 60% data collection; full report to be released in 2017.

<sup>6</sup> UN Women, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/5/women-of-south-sudan-set-strategic-agenda-for-a-gender-responsive-peace-agreement>

<sup>7</sup> For more, see UN Women <http://wps.unwomen.org/en/highlights/15th-anniversary-of-1325>

2. **Support a long-term, comprehensive approach to preventing and responding to VAWG and promoting gender equality** in South Sudan, including by supporting the work of local women’s organisations, and:
  - a) Ensure longer term funding for VAWG prevention and response, including specialised services for survivors, is available within and outside of ‘acute’ emergency response and is accessible to local organisations
  - b) Make mandatory the implementation of the *IASC Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action* for all partners in order to mitigate risks for women, girls and other vulnerable populations as standard approaches in programming and operations
  - c) Support the implementation of the South Sudanese action plan on preventing and responding to sexual violence in conflict co-written in 2014 by the Office of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict
  - d) Tackle the impunity of VAWG in South Sudan by ensuring that planning for an AU Hybrid court makes explicit reference to crimes based on gender, including all forms of VAWG.
  
3. **Aim to have at least 6% of its deployed peacekeepers female**, including in the engineering and health teams. Overall, 15% of all other deployed staff, including military observers, police support and corrections officers should be female in line with the outcome statement of the UK-hosted UN Peacekeeping Ministerial in September 2016.
  
4. **Push the international community to improve accountability for UN Peacekeeping and aid worker sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)**. This should include pressing for an international mechanism for SEA cases which is survivor-centred in its approach and ensures justice for all as recommended by a growing number of experts and practitioners, including UN Women and the House of Lords Select Committee on Sexual Violence in Conflict.
  
5. **Continue to deliver a combination of humanitarian and long-term support to South Sudan, and increase core funding for women’s rights organisations**. As we approach the fourth year of conflict, most support from donors is still geared towards relief and emergency. DFID is already leading on providing more long-term support but should invest more in helping to strengthen a thriving women’s rights movement in South Sudan, as well as the autonomy and sustainability of local women’s rights groups. This will better enable civil society to achieve stronger, more sustainable outcomes for women’s health, economic empowerment, education, safety and decision-making power.

