

CSRF Analysis: Gender Dynamics in Community Social Protection

Trends, Impacts, and Conflict-sensitivity Implications on Aid in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan

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Summary

This report provides an analysis of gender dynamics in community social protection in Northern Bahr El Ghazal (NBG), South Sudan. The analysis is based on field research and a review of desk literature conducted in March 2025. Semi-structured key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in NBG and Juba with a total of 38 respondents (9 men and 29 women) respondents included individuals aged between 18 and 80 years, and from diverse social statuses, economic, educational backgrounds, and occupations.

The purpose of this study is to examine the changing trends of gender dynamics in community social protection, their impacts on household economic livelihoods, gender relations, and community cohesion, as well as their implications for conflict sensitivity in aid programming.

Summary of Key Findings

Gendered contributions to community social protection are evolving. In community social protection, women have taken on greater roles, particularly in providing for families and offering emotional support to those women in need, while men's contributions are declining. The ability of many women to generate income and support their families depends on access to aid assistance, income-generating opportunities such as paid work, and market access for trade. Conversely, men's traditional role as primary providers is diminishing, largely due to limited employment opportunities and prolonged absences from home. These factors constrain their ability to fulfil expected responsibilities, shifting the burden onto their wives. However, men still dominate decision-making processes at both the household and community levels. Meanwhile, women's representation in local decision-making structures is gradually improving. While women acknowledge their presence in customary authorities, local councils at the payam and village levels, churches, and other governance bodies, they also recognize the

limitations of their influence. Many openly admit that making significant contributions or shaping decision-making processes in these structures remains a challenge.

The traditional mutual support system is eroding.

The traditional Dinka mutual support system, a vital kinship-based network, historically enabled wealthy families to assist vulnerable relatives during shortages or capable individuals to assist them with physically demanding tasks such as farming and shelter construction — without monetary payment. This system has been essential for the survival of vulnerable individuals, including the elderly, orphans, widows, and the sick, particularly during times of crisis. The traditional Dinka mutual support system, a vital kinship-based network, historically enabled wealthy families to assist vulnerable relatives during shortages or capable individuals to assist them with physically demanding tasks such as farming and shelter construction — without monetary payment. This system has been essential for the survival of vulnerable individuals, including the elderly, orphans, widows, and the sick, particularly during times of crisis and planting seasons. However, prolonged

war and economic instability have significantly eroded this support structure. As a result, vulnerable community members no longer receive financial assistance or free labour from wealthier or physically able relatives, forcing them to rely on aid assistance and precarious income-generating activities for survival.

The transformation of gender roles in community social protection is a decades-long process. the long history of wars both in the pre- and post-independence periods not only contributed to undermining the traditional rigid gendered community social protection roles and economic livelihoods. They have also deprived many households of their male members as men were recruited to fight where they were killed, injured, or separated from their families for longer times. As a result, women have been left with no choice but to assume roles traditionally held by men. This transformation of gender roles was exacerbated by the economic crisis which became prevalent following the outbreak of conflict in Juba in 2013 and worsened over time.

The shifting gender roles in community social protection impact household relations in both positive and negative ways. As women take on greater responsibilities such as providing for their families while also managing care and household chores, their workload has become overwhelming. Consequently, many women delegate tasks such as cooking and cleaning to their daughters, negatively affecting their school attendance and academic performance. Household gender conflicts are also prevalent in many households across NBG. These conflicts often stem from men's desire to monopolise decision-making over household resources, including their wives' incomes. Tensions also arise when men attempt to restrict their wives from seeking paid work or engaging in trade, yet fail to provide for their households, leading to frustration and conflict. However, in some households, women not only have the freedom to engage in trade or paid work but also receive support from their husbands. In these cases,

husbands consult their wives on decisions related to household resources, fostering a more collaborative approach to making household decisions and managing resources.

Moreover, shifting gender roles in community social protection affect community cohesion. This report finds that women face significant challenges in participating in both the market and decision-making institutions, largely due to resistance from men. Many men perceive women's increasing engagement and success in activities outside the household such as in markets and local governance as a power struggle and a threat to their dominance, prompting various forms of opposition. For example, women who achieve success in businesses are sometimes accused of engaging in prostitution with influential leaders or wealthy individuals to generate income. Similarly, women in positions of authority who openly speak out and advocate for survivors of gender-based violence frequently face targeted harassment from male colleagues, often being labelled as witches or accused of disrespecting men. Furthermore, women's increasing reliance on market participation and paid work has altered kinship-based relationships. Traditionally, women's social networks were rooted in kinship ties. Today, relationships are increasingly formed in churches, markets, workplaces, and informal women-led associations. This shift has weakened kinship-based bonds, making it more difficult for some women to find support, leaving them vulnerable to isolation and suffering.

Introduction

This study examines the changing gender dynamics in community social protection within the NBG state. The study, which builds on previous Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) research on social protection in South

Sudan¹, offers a nuanced assessment and analysis to enhance the contextual understanding of the shifting gender dynamics in community social protection.

For clarity, it is essential to distinguish community-based social protection from aid-based social protection. The aid-based social protection concept encompasses ‘all public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized; with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalised groups’.² Community-based social protection, however, is “a grouping of activities that protect community members from risk through ‘locally arranged social protection measures that are predicated on people’s cultural beliefs, norms and values.’”³ Though the overarching goal of both social protection and community social protection is to reduce the economic and social vulnerability of those most at risk in a society; community social protection, nevertheless, focuses more closely on local arrangements that are often informal but play a vital role in fostering household livelihood resilience, strengthening community cohesion, and providing safety nets tailored to the unique needs of a given community.⁴

The paper critically examines the evolving nature and trends of gender dynamics in community

social protection, their impacts on household economic livelihoods, gender relations, and community cohesion, as well as their implications for conflict sensitivity in aid assistance programming in the state of NBG.

The study was conducted in March 2025 and employed qualitative methods for data collection, including semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and a review of the desk literature and online sources on gender dynamics in South Sudan. Rapid fieldwork was carried out in Juba and in Aweil town and its surrounding areas, from 16th -22nd March 2025. 8 telephone interviews were conducted in Juba with women representing various sectors, including civil society organizations, academia, humanitarian aid, and government. In Aweil, 6 KIIs and 5 FGDs with 30 respondents (9 men and 21 women) were conducted, with women and men of different socioeconomic statuses, categories, ages, local officials, traditional leaders, local youth, women leaders, and local aid workers. Interviews were conducted in the Malou Aweer, Maper, and Mathiang residential areas in Aweil town, as well as in Apada and Nyalath, in the suburbs of Aweil.

The Background of Northern Bahr el Ghazal and its gender dynamics

¹ Gworo, Ranga, et al., (2025). See [Enhancing community-based social protection for sustainable use of aid in South Sudan: Guidance for conflict and context sensitive aid](#). *CSRF report*; Logo, Kuyang Harriet, (February 2017). [Gender Norms, Conflict and Aid: Research Conducted in Yambio and Rumbek](#). *Conflict Sensitivity Research Facility (CSRF) report*; and Raddadi, Gaya, (2024). [CSRF Analysis: South Sudanese Women Negotiating Agency in Conflict Resolution](#). *Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) Report*.

² Devereux, Stephen, et al., (2004). [Transformative Social Protection](#). *IDS Working Paper 232*. Also cited in Gworo, Ranga, et al., (2025). [Enhancing](#)

community-based social protection for sustainable use of aid in South Sudan: Guidance for conflict and context sensitive aid.

³ Mupedziswa, R., et al., (2013). [The contribution of non-formal social protection to social development in Botswana](#). *Development Southern Africa*, vol.30(1), p.84-97. Also cited in Browne, Evie, (2013). [Community Base Social Protection](#). *GSDRC research report*.

⁴ Mupedziswa, R., et al., (2013). The contribution of non-formal social protection to social development in Botswana. Also cited in Browne, Evie, (2013). [Community Base Social Protection](#).

NBG is one of the ten states and three administrative areas of South Sudan, with its capital in Aweil, and situated to the Northwest of the country on the border with Sudan. To the North, NBG shares borders with Sudan's West Kordofan and East Darfur states, and in the Northwest, it borders South Darfur state. In South Sudan, NBG borders the Abyei administrative area and Warrap state to the east and Western Bahr el Ghazal to the South and Southwest.⁵

The state consists of five counties and is home to two ethnic groups: The Malual section of the Dinka people and the Luo. The Dinka make up an overwhelming majority, occupying four out of the five counties.⁶ Additionally, there are the Fellata/Fulani herdsmen or nomads from West Africa, also known locally as the Ambororo, who often come to Aweil Centre and West counties in search of water and pastures for their animals.⁷ NBG is one of the most populous states after Warrap, with an estimated population of 1.9 million people as of 2021.⁸ Its high population

density is linked to its long-standing history as one of the most populated areas in the Southern Sudan (now South Sudan). Also, NBG has maintained relative stability since 2005, despite a few occasional attacks along its Sudanese border.⁹ This stability has attracted a significant number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from neighbouring states facing insecurity. Additionally, the state experienced the largest influx of returnees in the post-2005 period. By 2009, returnees — primarily from northern Sudan, now present-day Sudan — accounted for 51 percent of its population.¹⁰

Despite its current stability, NBG is one of the states that suffered the most during Sudan's second civil war (1983–2005), which was fought between the Government of Sudan (GoS) in Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) in the South.¹¹ Its geographical proximity to Darfur and Kordofan — where the Sudanese government recruited its proxy *murahliin* militias¹² — exposed the state to persistent attacks and extreme devastation,

⁵ Majok, Joseph, (2024). [War and the Borderland: Northern Bahr el Ghazal During the Sudan Conflict](#). Rift Valley Institute.

⁶ For more about counties, see CSRF [Counties Profile](#) report for more. See also, Majok, Joseph Diing. (2021). [War, Migration, and Work: Agricultural Labour and Cross Border Migration from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan](#). Rift Valley Institute.

⁷ Radio Tamazuj (2023). [Aweil Centre County Community Expels Fellata Cattle Keepers](#). Independent News.

⁸ NBS, (2021). [Press Release of the official results of the modelled population estimation survey](#). National Bureau of Statistics.

⁹ Saferworld (2021). [Enhancing People's Resilience in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan](#). Briefing paper. Santschi Martina and Georg Frerks (2024). The Disappearance of Intra-Communal Violence as a Legacy of SPLM/A Rebel Governance in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, South Sudan. *Civil War*, pp. 1-25.

¹⁰ IOM (International Organization for Migration) Report, (2009). [Sudan Annual Report](#). International Organization for Migration. Geneva, Switzerland.

¹¹ Deng, Luka Biong (2010). [Livelihood Diversification and Civil War: Dinka Communities in Sudan's Civil War](#). *Journal of Eastern African Studies*. 4(3), pp.381-399.

¹² Murahliin, sometimes spelled 'murahleen,' is an Arabic term meaning mobile people or nomads. The name reflects the mobility of the Misseriya and Rizeigat nomads from the Darfur and Kordofan regions, among whom the militia organization recruited its fighters. In 1985, the Government of Sudan established the militia as a low-cost proxy force capable of securing and maintaining a defensive line along the North-South border to prevent incursions by Southern rebels. This militia has been responsible with the widespread attacks and destructions across Northern Bahr el Ghazal and other regions in the South bordering Darfur and Kordofan. For more about Murahliin, see Mawson, N. M. Nadrew, (1997). [II Murahaleen Raids on the Dinka, 1985-89](#). *Disasters*, vol.15(2), p.93-207.

leading to widespread famine (notably in 1988 and 1998) and the displacement of thousands of households.¹³ The war disrupted traditional ways of life and fundamentally reshaped gender roles, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to shape present-day gender dynamics in community social protection, compounded by other socioeconomic factors.¹⁴

Today, the primary economic livelihoods in NBG are animal husbandry and subsistence farming. The region possesses fertile land suitable for cultivating a variety of crops, including sorghum, groundnuts, sesame, maize, millet, and others. Livestock, including cattle, goats, and sheep, hold both high economic and social value, serving as a crucial safety net for households during times of scarcity.¹⁵ In addition to providing food and income, cattle are traditionally given as a form of bride wealth in marriages. As a result, their ownership remains deeply rooted in the local tradition, and their possession elevates an individual's social status within the community.¹⁶ Equally, trading and paid employment are also crucial sources of household economic livelihood across the state.

Both men and women engage in income-generating activities. Men primarily engage in selling livestock and forest products such as wood and charcoal, as well as running both small and large retail shops.¹⁷ Others migrate in search of

military work or other forms of paid employments in towns, cities, gold mines, and even across the border in Sudan—particularly before the outbreak of war in Khartoum in 2023.¹⁸

Meanwhile women dominate the informal sector of the economy. They manage various micro-businesses, with only a fraction of them – mostly restricted by their husbands – not engaged in income-generating activities.¹⁹ Many women sell forest products, such as house-thatching grass and grass mats, while others operate restaurants, run local bars and tea stalls, and sell a variety of food items and second-hand clothes at small stands. Some women engage in hawking, traveling between rural markets and villages to sell their products. Others find paid work at construction sites, on farms, or as cleaners in affluent homes and public offices.²⁰

The Gender Dynamics in Community Social Protection – an Overview

Community social protection has traditionally been a shared responsibility between genders, with each assuming distinct roles – sometimes strictly defined, sometimes overlapping – that contribute to the well-being of families and communities. However, gender roles are not static; rather, they are dynamic and continually

¹³ Deng, Luka Biong, (1999). [Famines in the Sudan: Causes, Preparedness, and Response. A Political, Social, and Economic Analysis of the 1998 Bahr el Ghazal Famine](#). Brighton: IDS Discussion Paper Series, 369, *Institute of Development Studies*.

¹⁴ Majok, Joseph Diing (2019). [War, Migration and Work: Changing Social Relations in the South Sudan Borderland](#). *Rift Valley Institute* report.

¹⁵ Logo, Kuyang Harriet, (February 2017). Gender Norms, Conflict and Aid: Research Conducted in Yambio and Rumbek.

¹⁶ Logo, Kuyang Harriet, (February 2017). Gender Norms, Conflict and Aid. Also with Focus Group Discussion at Malou Aweer, March, 2025.

¹⁷ FGD with a group of women in Malou Aweer, March, 2025. Also, Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2020). [Breaking out of the Borderlands: Understanding Migrant Pathways from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan](#). Rift Valley Institute report.

¹⁸ Majok, Joseph, (2024). War and the Borderland. See also Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2020). Breaking out of the Borderland

¹⁹ FGD with a group of women in Malou Aweer, March, 2025

²⁰ Nicki, et al., (2019). [Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan's Borderlands](#). *Rift Valley Institute* Report.

reshaped overtime by the prevailing conditions.²¹ This section provides a holistic overview of the changing gender dynamics in community social protection in NBG.

In NBG, women's traditional roles in social protection were largely confined to the household. They perform duties related to caring for vulnerable family members and babies, household chores, food production, and tending livestock. An old woman in Maper recalled, *"in the past, women did not work to provide for their households as today. They stayed at home and looked after their children, household livestock, and crops"*²² They also organised rotational free gang labour²³ to cultivate and weed their farms, as well as those of the vulnerable members of their extended families.²⁴ Outside the homes, their roles were minimal, though important. In the local justice system, women's roles were limited and informal but essential for maintaining intra-community peace and cohesion. In the traditional authority courts, for example, chiefs worked with elderly women who acted as informal investigators. Their roles include taking care of and investigating women arraigned in courts and undergoing investigation on adultery, theft charges, and other gender sensitive issues.²⁵ However, women did not sit in the courts or have the power to influence the decision-making processes.²⁶ Elder women are

equally informal agents of peace, counsellors, and advisors for and among young women within their communities.²⁷ However, although their roles in peace-building efforts are informal and centred on women's issues, they address culturally sensitive issues and contribute significantly to preserving community cohesion and peaceful coexistence.²⁸

In recent decades, women's traditional contributions to community social protection have undergone significant shifts. For instance, the traditional mutual support systems, which existed for and among women, such as rotational free gang labour and communal assistance provided by community members for vulnerable women like widows, the elderly, and women with disabilities administered by local courts, have largely disappeared.²⁹ A participant in a FGD in Malou Aweer, who became a widow in 2012 after her husband was killed in the fighting between the SPLA and SAF (Sudan Armed Forces) in Heglig, shared her concerns about the breakdown of mutual support systems. As a mother of seven children, she emphasized that *"nobody is there to support widows and other vulnerable people anymore, even when they are caring for many*

²¹ Raddadi, Gaya, (2024). CSRF Analysis: South Sudanese Women Negotiating Agency in Conflict Resolution.

²² Interview with an elder woman in Maper West, March, 2025

²³ In this report, free gang labor refers to the traditional Dinka practice known as **'kut'** — a system in which extended family members informally come together, based on kinship ties, to cultivate or weed farms or perform other tasks that are labor intensive for their relatives, including vulnerable individuals. Rather than receiving monetary payment, workers instead are given food, tobacco, and local alcoholic drinks.

²⁴ Gworo, Ranga, et al., (2025). Enhancing Community-based Social Protection for Sustainable

Use of Aid in South Sudan: Guidance for Conflict and Sensitive Aid

²⁵ Ibid. also in the FGD with a group of women in Maper, March 2025

²⁶ FGD with a group of women in Malou Aweer, March 2025.

²⁷ interview with a vegetable farmer old man in Nyalath, March 2025.

²⁸ FGD with a group of women in Malou Aweer, March 2025. See also; Raddadi, Gaya, (2024). CSRF Analysis: South Sudanese Women Negotiating Agency in Conflict Resolution.

²⁹ Gworo, Ranga, et al., (2025). Enhancing Community-based Social Protection for Sustainable Use of Aid in South Sudan: Guidance for Conflict and Sensitive Aid.

children.”³⁰ The participants attributed the rapid erosion of this traditional support system to the prolonged war, which deprived people of their livestock wealth, as well as economic inflation, which has made life increasingly difficult since 2013.

Alternatively, women have assumed new roles in community social protection, such as providing for their families, a responsibility that was once traditionally held by men. This transition to household dependence on women has been driven by the declining ability of men to sustain their households financially due to the increasing lack of paid employment opportunities or their absence from homes. A young woman in Maper articulates these new dynamics,

“If we talk about food, school fees, clothes for children, and treatment bills, it is no longer the men providing them for most households in Aweil; instead, it is women. Let’s take an example from me: My husband (ed. note, who is a military officer) hardly provides for our family. He has no assignment and hasn’t received his salary in over a year, and even when he does, it’s not enough to support us. Our entire family has been relying on my business for years now.”³¹

As women have increasingly taken on the role of providers, the breakdown of traditional mutual support systems has had severe consequences. Even the most vulnerable women who head their households are now forced to fend for themselves, often without any support from relatives. The widow in Malou Aweer, for

example, receives no support from relatives despite looking after seven children. As a result, she managed to send only three youngest children to a nearby community school and withdrew the rest to reduce the burden of paying their school fees and also help her in generating income to support the family.³² Equally, women’s traditionally informal social protection roles, such as counselling and peace-building efforts within communities, have shifted but have not disappeared. They have gained more visibility and strength, significantly elevating their status within the communities, although they continue to remain largely informal.³³ Women counsellors we spoke to noted that they are now invited or sometimes intervene in homes to provide counselling or prayer support for women in need. However, they do not offer the same service to men without the inclusion of male pastors or counsellors in their groups.³⁴

These shifting gender dynamics in community social protection have placed greater responsibilities on women, including providing for their families, contributing to local peace-building efforts, and offering counselling, emotional support, and, at times, financial assistance to those in need, all within an increasingly challenging social and economic environment. However, their ability to navigate the current challenging economic environment and succeed amid shifting gender dynamics and evolving roles in community social protection depends on factors such as access to markets,

³⁰ FGD with a group of women in Malou Aweer, March 2025

³¹ Interview with a young woman in Maper West, March, 2025. The same point articulated by the young woman was also raised and discussed across most interviews and FGDs in Aweil, March 2025. For more on this, see also; Nicki, et al., (2019). Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan’s Borderlands.

³² FGD with a group of women in Malou Aweer, March 2025.

³³ Our discussions with women and men in Northern Bahr el Ghazal through interviews we conducted demonstrated that women’s contribution to their households and community social protection are becoming stronger and visible today than a decade ago. For more, see Raddadi, Gaya, (2024). CSRF Analysis: South Sudanese Women Negotiating Agency in Conflict Resolution.

³⁴ FGD with a group of women in Malou Aweer, March 2025.

paid employment opportunities, and access to aid assistance.³⁵

Access to markets enables women to trade and generate income to cover essential expenses such as food, their children's school fees, and medical bills for family members. However, due to their limited control over family resources, such as livestock, women often lack sufficient cash, leading them to conduct most of their trading activities within the informal sector of the local economy.³⁶

In NBG, women commonly raise cash for market participation through microloans obtained from individual money lenders, informal savings associations, or community support groups established in churches and neighbourhoods. Many women interviewed are members of local informal cash saving associations formed in their local markets or neighbourhood from which they borrow money to finance their immediate needs whenever cash available.³⁷ Microloans disbursed through savings associations and support groups give vulnerable women easy access to the market. They also protect them from relying on money lenders in local markets, who charge exorbitant interest rates—ranging from 50 to 100 percent per month.³⁸

At this point, it is crucial to recognise that women's informal networks and associations

across towns and villages in the state not only foster a sense of community but also create valuable opportunities for connections and support, both emotionally and financially.³⁹ Additionally, the sale of personal belongings or assets, as well as paid work and aid assistance, are alternative means through which women mobilise capital to enter the market.⁴⁰

Like trading, paid work is also fundamentally crucial for women across NBG to raise cash incomes to sustain their household needs. Women we spoke to noted that paid jobs are now scarce, precarious, seasonal, and underpaid, yet they remain critical sources of wage income for supporting their families.⁴¹ The precarity and seasonality of paid jobs have driven them to engage in additional income-generating activities, such as informal trading or seeking aid assistance to supplement their earnings.⁴² Women who engage in paid work also participate in saving associations to set aside small portions of their wages as startup capital for small-scale income-generating businesses (if they do not already have one) or as side savings to cover hospital bills and school fees for children.⁴³ This strategy helps them mitigate the effects of losing their paid employment while enabling them to continue providing for their families, even after losing their employment.⁴⁴

Aid assistance provided through various social protection programs by international aid

³⁵ Interview with an elder woman in the East of Malou Aweer, March, 2025. See also; Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2021). [Community Approaches to Epidemic Management in South Sudan: Lessons from Local Health Care Systems in South Sudan](#). *Rift Valley Institute* Report.

³⁶ Nicki, et al., (2019). *Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan's Borderlands*.

³⁷ FGDs with a group of women and men in Apada, and with a group of women in Malou Aweer, March, 2025.

³⁸ Interview with a young woman in Maper West, March 2025.

³⁹ Interview with an elder woman in the East of Malou Aweer, March, 2025.

⁴⁰ Interview with a young woman in Mathiang, and FGD discussions with a group of women and men in Apada, March, 2025. See also; Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2019). *Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan's Borderlands*.

⁴¹ FGD with a group of women in Maper North and Maper West, March 2025.

⁴² Interview with an elder woman in the East of Malou Aweer, and interview with a woman in Maper West, March, 2025. See also; Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2019). *Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour*.

⁴³ FGDs with a group of women in Maper, Malou Aweer and Apada, March, 2025.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

agencies and donors also plays a crucial role beyond household survival to include strengthening women's economic power.⁴⁵ Access to food aid, cash transfers, skill development, knowledge training, and agricultural tools, ensures that women can sustain and maximise their ability to provide for their families while also securing startup capital to enter the market. By leveraging these resources, women increase their household consumption and strengthen their economic independence, enabling them to negotiate their positions and influence within the household and community levels.⁴⁶

Women interviewed in Aweil noted that they invest part of their aid assistance funds into small businesses, expecting to continue supporting their households even after the program ends.⁴⁷ Women also stated that the training provided by aid agencies, covering skills and knowledge in areas such as conflict resolution and psychosocial support, has significantly enhanced their ability to contribute to local peacebuilding, counselling, and emotional support efforts, earning them recognition and respect within their communities.⁴⁸ Moreover, training in financial literacy and gardening, along with support and tools, has increased their ability to generate cash income (through small-scale vegetable farming, weaving bedsheets, and tablecloths, etc.), as well

as the skill to manage cash-saving associations. As a result, they can manage their businesses proceed more effectively.⁴⁹

Women's participation in local justice and decision-making institutions and processes is also steadily increasing, albeit slowly. Their inclusion in these structures has been supported by access to education and years of advocacy efforts by aid agencies, which have pushed for women's economic inclusion, representation in local authorities and other decision-making bodies, as outlined in peace agreement documents.⁵⁰ As a result, women are now visibly present in the community level justice and governance structures across NBG, facilitating their involvement in decision-making processes. However, they are still underrepresented, and efforts to achieve gender equality in these structures continue to face resistance from men.⁵¹ For example, in a FGD in Maper North, one participant, a member of the only woman-led chief court in the Maper area, explained that the chief, Sultana Abuk, is constantly subjected to verbal attacks and criticism by members of the nearby male-dominated chief court. They even challenge the legitimacy of her authority and court, despite her possession of official documents.⁵²

The support provided by aid agencies significantly strengthens women's economic resilience,

⁴⁵ Telephone interview with a humanitarian aid worker in Juba, March, 2025. Also for more details about social protection programming in South Sudan, see UNICEF (2019). [Mapping and Analysis of Social Protection in South Sudan](#). report by *Ministry of Gender, Child, and Social Welfare and UNICEF*; and South Sudan Annual Report, (2021). [National Social Protection Policy Framework](#). *Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare*.

⁴⁶ UNICEF (2019). Mapping and Analysis of Social Protection in South Sudan.

⁴⁷ FGD with a group of women and men in Apada, and Malou Aweer, March 2025.

⁴⁸ Interview with a woman in the East of Malou Aweer and FGDs with a group of women in Maper North, March, 2025

⁴⁹ FGD with a group of women and men in Apada, and interview with a vegetable farmer old man in Nyalath, March 2025.

⁵⁰ FGDs with a group of women and men in Apada, March 2025. see also Raddadi, Gaya, (2024). CSRF Analysis: South Sudanese Women Negotiating Agency in Conflict Resolution.

⁵¹ Though many women we spoke to acknowledge their involvement in the decision making processes in the household and community levels, they stress that their opinions are ignored or downplayed when they contradict those proposed by men.

⁵² FGD with a group of women in Maper, March, 2025.

capacities, and skills, providing them with the tools needed to negotiate their inclusion and meaningful participation — even in the absence of aid agencies — in economic activities and the decision-making processes at both household and community levels.⁵³ So, despite men’s continued dominance over decision-making institutions and structures, it is important to recognise that women are no longer passive onlookers, as they traditionally were. Instead, women now exercise their agency to challenge these systems and negotiate their spaces within them, although their influence remains weak and largely informal. This was articulated by a respondent in Malou Aweer who stressed, *“today is not like the past when men had to decide everything that concerned their community without a single woman among them. They now include us in any discussions that concern the community and if they don’t, we will ask”*.⁵⁴

Men’s social protection roles, on the other hand, appear to be declining, particularly in terms of providing for their households.⁵⁵ The waves of military recruitment that targeted NBG during the second war and the post-independence period (2012–2016), along with labour migration to cities within South Sudan and across the border due to limited employment opportunities, have significantly altered household structures. These factors, especially before the outbreak of war in Sudan, have left many households without men and increasingly headed by women.⁵⁶ These migrant men struggled to find stable employment, limiting their ability to send back remittances to support their families, ultimately

shifting the financial burden onto their wives. The men who stay behind also struggle to secure better-paid jobs amid the country’s worsening economic condition and declining food production, which equally weakens their ability to provide for their families in an increasingly monetized economy.⁵⁷

At the community level, men continue to dominate decision-making authorities, institutions, and the economy. Although many men are absent or unable to provide for their families due to lack of employment opportunities, some have access to financial resources through employment in the government, military, and aid agencies, as well as trade.⁵⁸ Others also operate medium and large-scale businesses, selling a variety of imported goods of high value. Additionally, men also dominate money-lending enterprises and own shops and farmlands, which they rent out — mostly to women who, due to cultural and economic issues, rarely possess land titles.⁵⁹ This dynamic enables them to exploit women by charging exorbitant interest rates and high rents, leaving many women heavily indebted and keep them in the informal sector of the economy.

They also play crucial roles in times of disaster such as building dykes, erecting collapsed walls, and transporting heavy loads as families move to higher ground. Their absence sometimes puts

⁵³ interview with a vegetable farmer old man in Nyalath, and interview with an old woman in the East of Malou Aweer, March 2025.

⁵⁴ Interview with an elder woman in the East of Malou Aweer, March, 2025.

⁵⁵ Interview with a young woman in Maper West, March, 2025. See also; Majok, Joseph Diing, (2019). War, Migration and Work: Changing Social Relations in the South Sudan Borderlands.

⁵⁶ Boswel, Alan, (2019). [INSECURE POWER AND VIOLENCE: The Rise and Fall of Paul Malong and](#)

[Mathiang Anyoor](#). *HSBA Briefing Paper*. Also Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2020). Breaking out of the Borderlands: Understanding Migrant Pathways from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan.

⁵⁷ Nicki, et al., (2019). Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan’s Borderlands.

⁵⁸ Nicki, et al., (2019). Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan’s Borderlands.

⁵⁹ Nicki, et al., (2019). Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan’s Borderlands.

these roles on the already overburdened women and their daughters.⁶⁰

Moreover, similarly to men, boys' social protection roles are on the decline and shifting. Traditionally, boys tended cattle and cultivated household farms belonging to families and members of their extended families in the form of free gang labour.⁶¹ Free gang labour is rapidly disappearing as livelihoods are increasingly becoming dependent on cash, commonly raised through paid work.⁶²

Boys are increasingly seeking paid work, including from close relatives, and engaging in informal businesses to support their parents in raising cash incomes to buy food or school fees for their siblings or themselves. Those who lack job opportunities and access to education often turn to gangs as a means of survival, posing a significant threat to local security and night-time safety on the roads.⁶³ This situation is further exacerbated by aid agencies' neglect of young men in their assistance programs, alongside rising school dropout rates driven by inflation and the collapse of most rural public schools as most qualified teachers abandon them and moved into towns to look for better paid jobs, severely limiting access to education for many children.⁶⁴ These changing gender dynamics in community social protection roles in NBG, as discussed

earlier, did not emerge overnight; rather, they evolved and were shaped by various factors over several decades. In the later section of this paper, these factors and their trends are examined, highlighting their influence on the shifts in household and community gender relations.

Key Trends in the Gender Dynamics Shifts in NBG

Over the past decades, gender roles within community social protection in NBG have undergone significant transformations. Two main factors have largely driven these shifts: the widespread displacement caused by the second Sudanese civil war and famines in the 1980s/90s, and the postwar political and socioeconomic changes, including the mass return of displaced populations. This section highlights how these factors have transformed and reshaped gender dynamics and altered traditional gender roles within community social protection.

The second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005)⁶⁵ caused widespread destruction and loss of approximately 40% of livestock – the main source of economic livelihood in NBG – causing vulnerability.⁶⁶ As a result, famine ensued, causing mass human displacement in NBG, and people were uprooted for over two decades and forced into refugee camps, IDP settlements,

⁶⁰ FGD discuss with a group of women in Malou Aweer, March 2025. In this FGD, women described how they have become the sole providers for most households. However, they also acknowledged that men continue to dominate decision-making, even in the same households where women bear the primary responsibility for providing.

⁶¹ Majok, Joseph Diing, (2019). War, Migration and Work: Changing Social Relations in the South Sudan Borderlands. See also; Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2020). Breaking out of the Borderlands: Understanding Migrant Pathways from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan.

⁶² Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2020). Breaking out of the Borderlands: Understanding Migrant Pathways from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan.

⁶³ Majok, Joseph, (2024). War and the Borderland: Northern Bahr el Ghazal During the Sudan Conflict. For more details, see also Sudan Post (2024).

[Government and Partners Strategize on Gangster Crimes in Aweil](#). Sudan Post News.

⁶⁴ Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2020). Breaking out of the Borderlands: Understanding Migrant Pathways from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan.

⁶⁵ Thomas, Eddie (2019). Moving Towards Markets: Cash, Commodification, and Conflict in South Sudan.

⁶⁶ Deng, Luka Biong (2010). [Social Capital and Civil War: The Dinka Communities in Sudan's Civil War](#). *African Affairs*, 109(435), pp.231-250.

cities, and farms in Northern Sudan.⁶⁷ Beyond humanitarian crisis, the war fractured families and altered survival strategies, profoundly transforming the traditionally rigid gender norms and roles.⁶⁸ Many men who lost their cattle joined the SPLA/M in Ethiopia, while women, children, and the elderly sought refuge in Northern Sudan, forcing women to assume both caregiving and provider roles.⁶⁹ Even IDP families headed by men in the North tended to depend on women for survival as men were unable to find jobs to feed their families. Equally, households which remained in NBG during the war depended on women for survival. This was because men were either away fighting, killed, or unable to farm due to persistent attacks as they were the primary target.⁷⁰ These circumstances, as a result, forced women to transition to paid work and trade as the alternative options to provide for their families.

For example, displaced women who lived in camps and cities across Northern Sudan engaged in manual labour, worked on farms for wages, and operated informal, and sometimes illegal, microbusinesses such as brewing and selling alcohol to generate cash income to feed families.⁷¹ Equally, those who remained in NBG, whether in the SPLA/M or government-controlled areas, raised money commonly through trade in local markets and garrison towns under the control of different warring factions while also gathering wild foods. They ran

tea stalls, restaurants, and small businesses, selling firewood, grass bundles, gum arabic, and other forest products to purchase food. Men living in areas controlled by these factions were often suspected of being fighters or enemy agents and were targeted and arrested or killed if they crossed into territories controlled by opposing factions limiting their ability to trade or move around to find work.⁷² In contrast, women's perceived vulnerability allowed them to move across various markets and towns controlled by opposing factions to trade or work.⁷³ This shift led to women taking on roles that had traditionally been reserved for men, a change that persisted even after the war ended, following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005.

Further, the CPA allocated 25 percent of positions in decision-making authorities at all levels of government to women. In 2018, the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which ended the December 2013 conflict, increased the percentage of positions allocated to women in decision-making bodies from 25 to 35 percent.⁷⁴ However, the South Sudan government has been reluctant to implement these policies, which aim to increase women's representation in official authorities and enhance their participation in decision-making. Despite this, aid agencies have continuously advocated for the implementation of the 35 percent quota, ensuring women receive

⁶⁷ Kindersley, Nicki, (2018). Politics, Power, and Chiefship in Famine and War.

⁶⁸ Kindersley, Nicki, (2018). Politics, Power, and Chiefship in Famine and War.

⁶⁹ Kindersley, Nicki, (2018). Politics, Power, and Chiefship in Famine and War.

⁷⁰ Majok, Joseph Diing. (2021). War, Migration, and Work: Agricultural Labour and Cross Border Migration from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan.

⁷¹ Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2019). Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan's Borderlands.

⁷² Kindersley, Nicki, (2018). Politics, Power, and Chiefship in Famine and War.

⁷³ Kindersley, Nicki, (2018). Politics, Power, and Chiefship in Famine and War. See also War, Migration, and Work: Agricultural Labour and Cross Border Migration from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan; and Carver, Freddie, et al., (2022). [Border Towns, Markets](#), and Conflict. *Join report from the Asia Foundation, Carnegie Middle East Centre and the Rift Valley Institute.*

⁷⁴ Raddadi, Gaya, (2024). CSRF Analysis: South Sudanese Women Negotiating Agency in Conflict Resolution.

their designated representation.⁷⁵ Though this provision is largely neglected at state and national levels, women we spoke to believe that there is a notable increase in women's participation in decision-making at local level, providing them with new responsibilities and roles within their communities.⁷⁶ As a result, women can now participate in the decision-making processes, which men traditionally dominated. However, their ability to exert meaningful influence in decision-making processes remains a major challenge.⁷⁷

Additionally, the large return to NBG after the Second Civil War, along with reforms in land tenure rights, heightened demand and competition for land, resulting in its swift commodification.⁷⁸ As a result, access to agricultural land became increasingly restricted for most post-war returnees and other poor households, with female-headed households being the most affected.⁷⁹ The difficulty of accessing land is further compounded by recent climatic conditions, including poor rainfall and flooding, which have rendered some areas in NBG less suitable for agriculture, forcing residents to seek farmland elsewhere or explore other options to survive. This has worsened women's land ownership and access rights, compelling them to seek alternative means of

generating income, such as sharecropping arrangements, paid work, trade, and reliance on aid, as their access to land becomes increasingly strained.⁸⁰

Moreover, the impacts of the 2013-2018 conflicts such as military recruitment and labour migrations have deprived many households of their men. This, coupled with inflation and lack of jobs as well as the impacts of Sudan's political crisis, maintains the burden of care and financial responsibility on the shoulders of women in most households.⁸¹ These decades of shifting in and transformation of traditional gendered community social protection roles have profoundly impacted household gender relations and community cohesion.

The Impacts of Shifting Gender Dynamics in Community Social Protection on Household Gender Relations and Community Cohesion

Across NBG, the shifting gender dynamics in community social protection have impacted household gender relations, economic livelihoods, and community cohesion. The increased involvement of women in income-generating activities such as paid work, trading, and aid assistance sometimes triggers gender-

⁷⁵ Kindersley, Nicki, et al. (2024). [Women in Authority in South Sudan. Connections, Challenges and Strategies in Leaderships](#). Rift Valley Institute report.

⁷⁶ Achirin, Achirn et al. (2020). [Women in Northern Bahr el Ghazal Region Call for Stipulated 35 Percent Political Representation](#). UNMISS report.

⁷⁷ Leonardi, Cherry and Martina Santschi (2016). [Dividing Communities in South Sudan and Northern Uganda: Boundary Disputes and Land Governance](#). Rift Valley Institute report.

-towards-markets-cash-commodification-and-conflict-south-sudan/" [Moving Towards Markets: Cash, Commodification, and Conflict in South Sudan](#). Rift Valley Institute report.

⁷⁹ Ibid. see also Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2019). Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan's Borderlands; and REACH, (2024). [Humanitarian Situation Overview: Aweil East and Northern Bahr el Ghazal October 2024](#). Situation Analysis Report

⁸⁰ Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2019). Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan's Borderlands; see also, Majok, Joseph Diing. (2021). War, Migration, and Work: Agricultural Labour and Cross Border Migration from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan.

⁸¹ Boswel, Alan, (2019). INSECURE POWER AND VIOLENCE. Also see Kindersley, Nicki, et al., (2020). Breaking out of the Borderlands: Understanding Migrant Pathways from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan.

based tensions and conflicts in some households, particularly between men and their wives. Such household disputes related to resource competition often arise from men's attempts to control their wives' incomes, sometimes resorting to violence when their wives resist. Men use physical and emotional violence to intimidate their wives and gain access to their incomes, maintain their status as household heads, and ensure their authority over the household remains unchallenged.⁸²

Such behaviours or actions by men who seek to control household incomes and decision-making are rooted in the traditional belief that *"whatever belongs to a woman is her husband's."*⁸³ This tradition upholds the customary principle that grants a man the right to claim ownership of everything his wife possesses and the authority to make decisions regarding those assets, upon payment of dowry cattle in marriage. This belief continues to persist among many, reinforcing men's perceived entitlement and, in some cases, being used as a justification for acts of violent abuses against their wives in disputes over their wives' incomes.⁸⁴

Household gender conflicts are not a new phenomenon in NBG and cannot be entirely attributed to shifts in gender roles; they have existed throughout history. However, there is no doubt that the growing scarcity of economic resources and years of conflict have exacerbated them. This is illustrated by a member of an FGD in Malou, who stated that *"Men who traditionally served as providers for their families now complain that they cannot find jobs. Aware that there are no opportunities available, they, without shame, turn around and place heavy*

expectations on women, even resorting to violence when their wives resist giving up the little money they earn from their businesses or work".⁸⁵

In other households, men continue to restrict their wives' mobility, preventing them from participating in activities outside the home. Across NBG, some women continue to face such limitations, which restrict their access to markets, paid employment, and aid assistance.⁸⁶ Men often justify these constraints by spreading false allegations against their wives or feigning concern for the well-being of their young children if left alone at home every day without their mothers. When these restrictions persist without the man adequately providing for the household, they escalate gender tensions: women protest their restrictions as their needs are not being fulfilled. This may consequently lead to household gender conflicts.⁸⁷

At the community level, on the other hand, gender tensions and conflicts not only persist but are also exacerbated by the shifting gender dynamics in community social protection. For instance, men perceive women's increasing engagement in community activities beyond the household as a power struggle and a threat to their dominance, prompting various forms of resistance or responses. Women respondents noted that men within their communities often easily accept and spread blackmailing stories against women who are seen as actively engaged in income-generating activities out of their homes, prompting their husbands to restrict their

⁸² interview with a vegetable farmer old man in Nyalath, March 2025. Also the FGD with a group of women in Malou, March 2025.

⁸³ FGD with a group of men and women in Apada, March 2025.

⁸⁴ FGD with a group of men and women in Apada, March 2025.

⁸⁵ FGD with a group of women in Malou, March, 2025.

⁸⁶ Interview with a young woman in Mathiang, March 2025.

⁸⁷ FGD with a group of women in Malou, and with a group of men and women in Apada, March 2025.

freedom of movement.⁸⁸ Women view these actions as deliberate efforts by men to weaken their access to economic opportunities, positions of authority, and participation in decision-making processes. In other instances, successful women in trade face public defamation, accused—often without basis—of engaging in prostitution or acquiring witchcraft. Successful men are equally subjected to accusations of witchcraft – though such stories are discussed privately. Similarly, within local authorities, courageous and outspoken women in leadership are frequently targeted by male colleagues, labelled as witches, or deemed as disrespectful toward men, further undermining their authority and influence in decision-making processes.⁸⁹

These gender tensions in relationships are further demonstrated in the way men treat elderly women who provide free counselling services within their communities. Women counsellors who speak out openly and advocate for gender equality and the right for women to resist their oppressive husbands are labelled by men as "mujirimiin" (criminals) or referred to in Dinka as "tiengthon" (a woman who behaves like a bull).⁹⁰ This view is equally shared by conservative elderly women within the communities. As a result, the women who men allow their wives to consult regarding marital and other issues, or whom they tolerate entering their homes and speaking to their wives, are typically those who often advise women to remain submissive to their husbands rather than assert their independence.⁹¹ This shows that even the counselling service and other emotional support women provide and other gender

transformation activities sometimes, if not implemented with care, reinforce the existing gender norms and practices that favour men over women both in the household and community levels.

Furthermore, the impact of shifting gender dynamics on gender relations extends beyond the men-women binary to reveal complexities among women themselves. Traditionally, women's relationships and networks were built around lineage, but this is changing. Instead, they are now being formed around work, markets, churches, and associations. While these new connections are strengthening over time, they are also weakening lineage-based ties. This also leads to the isolation of women who face mobility restrictions and, consequently, limits their networking with other women. This shift is eroding long-standing bonds and trust among women within the same lineage, and in some cases, triggering tensions. It is also making access to information about aid, economic opportunities, and support – such as counselling services – difficult to acquire for women facing mobility restrictions.⁹²

Children are not an exception in the impacts of the changing gender dynamics on gender relations. Women reported increasing resistance from their daughters as they assign them more household roles. As women assume more community social protection roles, many—particularly those with daughters—find themselves delegating household duties to their daughters while they are away at the markets, aid distribution centres, or working for wages.

⁸⁸ FGD with a group of women in Malou, and interview with a young woman in Maper West, March, 2025.

⁸⁹ interview with a young woman in Maper West. The point was also raised and discussed in an informal discussion with a group of young men in Aweil town central, March, 2025.

⁹⁰ FGD with a group of women in Malou, and interview with a vegetable farmer old man in Nyalath, March 2025.

⁹¹ interview with a young woman in Mathiang, March 2025. The point was equally discussed in the informal discussion with a group of young men in Aweil town central, March, 2025.

⁹² interview with a young woman in Mathiang, March 2025

However, numerous women express concerns that this arrangement negatively impacts their daughters' school attendance. It limits their ability to attend classes, study, or complete their homework after school, ultimately affecting their academic performance. This, in turn, adds to the factors driving the increasing school dropout rates among girls,⁹³ undermining efforts by aid agencies and the government to enhance their access to education.⁹⁴ Women also note growing resistance from their daughters, who feel that household chores are compromising their future by distracting them from their educational commitments.⁹⁵

Similarly, women's prolonged absence from their households during the day, coupled with men traditionally being absent from homes, also affects the health and well-being of their young children. In their absence, some caregiving responsibilities — such as providing emotional support, guidance, and mentorship — are left unattended, as daughters are unable to assume these roles. This, along with other contributing factors, has led to an increase in street children, cases of early pregnancies, and a rise in criminal gangs, as well as violent crimes and theft orchestrated by these groups.⁹⁶ Women express their resentment toward men whom they perceive as having failed in their responsibility to provide, thereby forcing them to compromise their own roles in favour of caring for their children.

Nevertheless, gender relations in some households differ and are positive. Women's access to aid or income-generating activities positively influences their relationships with their husbands, fostering a climate of cooperation in household decision-making.⁹⁷ For decades, international aid agencies have provided a diverse range of aid assistance to vulnerable women through social protection programs. Their objective has been to enhance women's livelihood resilience, reduce gender-related conflicts, and strengthen their participation in decision-making processes at all levels.⁹⁸

While these aid initiatives have yet to fully ensure women's economic resilience or meaningful participation in economic activities and decision-making, they have made some progress. Despite ongoing challenges such as persistent economic crises, and other contributing factors,⁹⁹ they have achieved notable successes in addressing gender issues in some households. During an FGD in Malou Aweer, participants emphasised that some men are beginning to recognize the significant contributions women make to household economies. As a result, such men are now allowing their wives to seek aid and engage in income-generating activities. Other men are driven by the worsening economic crisis and their own unemployment to reluctantly permit their wives to access aid, trade, or find work to help support their families. Upon seeing their wives succeed in generating income and taking on the role of provider, others change their perception,

⁹³ Maper, Shadrach (2015). [Analysing Barriers to Girls' Education Outcomes in South Sudan](#). *Texila International Journal of Management*. And UNICEF report [here](#).

⁹⁴ See more about support for girls' education in South Sudan [here](#).

⁹⁵ FDG with a group of women in Malou Aweer, and with a group of women and men in Apada, March 2025.

⁹⁶ Interview with an old woman in Malou Aweer, March 2025. See also Gworo, Ranga, et al., (2025). Enhancing community-based social protection for

sustainable use of aid in South Sudan: Guidance for conflict and context sensitive aid

⁹⁷ Interview with a vegetable farmer old man in Nyalath, and with an old woman in Malou Aweer, March 2025.

⁹⁸ See UNICEF (2019). Mapping and Analysis of Social Protection in South Sudan, and South Sudan Annual Report, (2021). National Social Protection Policy Framework.

⁹⁹ See Saferworld, (2021). Enhancing People's Resilience in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan. For more about gender dynamics in NBG.

granting their wives more freedom to trade and even consulting them on household decisions.¹⁰⁰

A good example is a man in Nyalath who told us that he supports his wife with some of the physically demanding work on her vegetable farm, which Welthungerhilfe (WHH) set up. After the harvest, his wife sells the produce in local markets, and together, they decide how to allocate their earnings. The man, while concluding, stressed that *“households, where men plan and work together with their wives, are the ones navigating these economic challenges successfully, and those where men continue to refuse to change are the ones suffering the most. This economic crisis requires hard work and understanding between a man and his wife, and this is what I have chosen for my family”*.¹⁰¹

A woman in Malou Aweer, trained in counselling and conflict management, shared that her husband — initially reluctant to allow her to participate in activities outside the household — has changed over the years, granting her the freedom to pursue her career. She is now frequently invited by aid agencies and local churches to take part in counselling and conflict management training outside Aweil town, where she earns additional cash income in addition to trading at the Malou market. Her ability to generate cash income to support her family has strengthened her relationship with her unemployed husband, who now depends on her. Nevertheless, respondents still acknowledged that changes in men’s perceptions and behaviours toward women remain limited and require continuous support from aid agencies and the government.¹⁰² However, there are potential conflict sensitivity risks which require careful consideration by aid agencies during their interventions.

Conflict Sensitivity Risks in Aid Programming and Opportunities to Navigate

In the context of NBSG, a key conflict sensitivity risk that agencies must pay attention to is that women, as seen earlier, have taken on greater responsibilities in community social protection, including providing for their families and communities in addition to caregiving. Meanwhile, men's contributions are declining, though they continue to dominate decision-making at both the community and household levels. It is crucial for aid agencies to better understand these dynamics to ensure that women's insights into household and community needs — as well as their vulnerabilities — are not overlooked when addressing social protection needs, which are often led by men. A collaborative approach between aid agencies providing social protection services and traditional authorities, while meaningfully involving women leaders, presents an opportunity to ensure that women's perspectives are actively solicited and effectively addressed when providing social protection assistances. As a result, this would help mitigate potential gender conflicts related to aid assistance.

Another conflict sensitivity risk in aid programming is the prioritisation of women in aid assistance programs while excluding men. This approach leads to men’s neglect — some of whom lack income sources or livestock — leaving them vulnerable and at risk of losing influence over household decision-making to their wives. Such shifts may negatively affect household gender relations and potentially lead to increased gender-based violence. Men who fear that their wives, who receive aid assistance, would take advantage of their vulnerability to undermine their authority within the household may resort to violence as a means of asserting control. Thus,

¹⁰⁰ Interview with an old woman in Malou Aweer and with vegetable farmer old man in Nyalath, March 2025. The same point was discussed in the FGD in Apada.

¹⁰¹ Interview with vegetable farmer old man in Nyalath, March 2025.

¹⁰² Interview with an old woman in Malou Aweer, March 2025.

excluding men from aid assistance could also prompt some men to interfere with the aid assistance their wives receive or, in cases of resistance, resort to intimidation or physical violence.

Expanding social protection assistance to be more gender-inclusive could present an opportunity to mitigate the risk of humanitarian interventions triggering or exacerbating household gender tensions or conflicts related to aid distribution. It can also help prevent the transfer of economic vulnerability from women to men while promoting a more gender-inclusive approach to economic resilience.

Equally, including young men, especially those out of school, in the assistance programs can be a crucial opportunity to mitigate other gender and generational conflicts, including those not linked to aid assistance. Due to limited employment and educational opportunities, young men have increasingly been recruited into the military, gangs, or as political supporters for elites. In these environments, they become radicalized, posing a threat to their families and the broader community's peaceful coexistence. Incorporating them into aid programs could help prevent such crises and create opportunities for them to contribute positively to household and community coexistence rather than undermining it.

Furthermore, there is a persistent traditional belief in male privilege and entitlement regarding decision-making over household resources. As discussed earlier in this paper, and closely linked to household decision-making power dynamics, many men across NBG continue to believe they have the right and authority to determine the use of household resources, including those of their wives. A deeper understanding of such cultural beliefs could provide aid agencies with an opportunity to develop strategies that ensure social protection initiatives do not inadvertently reinforce these norms or contribute to household gender tensions and conflict.

Recommendations

This report makes the following recommendations to international, national, and local aid agencies, to consider in their future interventions in NBG and beyond.

Collaborate with local chiefs and other local leaders: aid agencies must continue collaborating with chiefs, as customary authority remains the most influential and legitimate local structure despite ongoing economic turbulence and the politicization of traditional authority by the government. However, agencies must prioritize and actively involve women chiefs in their collaborations with local authorities to amplify women's voices. Equally, implementing partners must be closely engaged at every stage of program implementation — from beneficiary identification and registration to aid distribution — to ensure that the inclusion of women chiefs and other women leaders is meaningful and to minimise the risk of manipulation.

Aid agencies must thoroughly understand existing norms and gender tensions before implementing their programmes and systematically develop and integrate robust gender-sensitive approaches at every stage of their interventions and monitor them throughout their program implementation. Such a proactive strategy will help minimise unintended negative consequences, such as exacerbating gender inequality or fuelling conflict. A key step in achieving this will be updating existing tools, such as needs-based assessments and conflict analyses, to capture and explore local gender dynamics more comprehensively. By refining these mechanisms, agencies can ensure their aid efforts are both equitable and conflict-sensitive.

Utilise monitoring and evaluation (M&E) impact assessment tools designed for conflict-sensitive contexts, to enhance aid agencies' understanding of how aid distribution interacts with local tensions and to capture conflict dynamics promptly. These tools, combined with regular program monitoring cycles can help capture

evolving conflict dynamics in real time and exact nature. Additionally, iterative adaptation processes in program implementation are equally important tools as they may enable agencies to promptly respond to shifting realities, ensuring aid interventions remain effective and sensitive to emerging risks. However, agencies must remain mindful of contextual differences when adopting such tools, ensuring they are suitably adjusted to fit the specific intervention setting.

Aid agencies should shift from targeting only women to also include men in their aid assistance interventions. Excluding adult and young men from aid programs risks exacerbating household gender tensions and conflict. The assumption that men control household resources and are economically better off than women is, in some instances, misleading within the context of NBG. While men continue to have authority over households' decision-making, many of them who lost their cattle wealth during the second Sudanese civil war have struggled without success to recover since the war ended in 2005. Consequently, supporting women while neglecting these men may create household gender tensions, as men lacking resources and employment seek access to aid through their wives. Additionally, the absence of men and their declining household responsibilities, the rise in women's participation in income-generating activities that keep them away from homes most of the time, and the increasing school dropout rate have not only increased negligence of young children but has also left young boys vulnerable to gang recruitment, steering them away from traditional gender roles. Including men in aid programs can help counteract the rising gang-related crimes and provide young men with early opportunities to rebuild their lives and establish stable futures.

Aid agencies should prioritise assistance that fosters self-reliance, especially amid the current dwindling aid resources. This includes providing tools and cash as start-up capital to vulnerable

households, along with skills and knowledge training to enhance beneficiaries' ability to manage their microbusinesses and finances more effectively. Also, investing in conflict resolution training is crucial for addressing escalating gender conflicts and other localized tensions related to aid distribution. By equipping individuals and communities with strategies to navigate disputes, agencies can help mitigate conflict and promote more sustainable, equitable aid outcomes.

Aid agencies implementing women's empowerment activities, such as economic resilience support, GBV awareness and management, and advocacy for women's inclusion in decision-making among others, should closely collaborate with local structures throughout their program implementations. These include traditional authorities, women's groups, and local youth organisations. Agencies should also consider building the capacities of these local actors to ensure sustainable engagement and long-term impact in their empowerment initiatives. Collaborating with these local structures and strengthening their capacities to address gender and aid-related conflicts is crucial for effective conflict-sensitive interventions. Such a bottom-up approach would ensure that local authorities are equipped with the tools and knowledge required to identify and address conflicts arising from aid distribution at their earliest stages, fostering more sustainable and equitable outcomes.

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