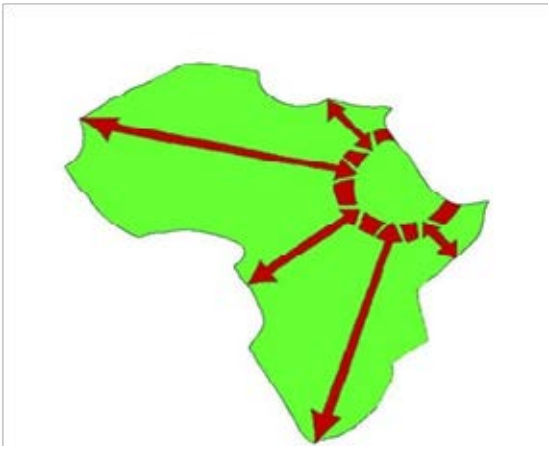
GENDER UNDER BOMBARDMENT

Gender Disparities in SPLM/A-North Controlled Areas of Nuba Mountains, Southern Kordofan



The Sudan Consortium -African and International Civil Society Action for Sudan

Table of Contents

“Not all men are so dull.
There are some clever ones here,
who know how to behave.
Maybe even sometimes do.”

A woman from Delami

Preface

"What I see is that in the community, when men do something good they gain approval and influence. We women do good each day carrying out our work, but it doesn't lead to us getting more influence on decisions made. In our view, our influence is there, but maybe men don't recognize this."

Since 2011, the people of the Nuba Mountains have borne the brunt of the fighting. The high tense relationship between the Sudanese ruling regime and the Sudan Liberation Movement at the time, which later developed into the SPLM/A-N in South Kordofan and Blue Nile has turned into a brutal armed conflict with a mass campaign of bombardment, dropping over 4,000 bombs on the region since record keeping began in 2012. Not only have civilians died as a direct result of the bombings, but livelihoods have been severely disrupted. The bombings have increased at times of planting and harvesting, indicating that this disruption is part of a deliberate strategy on the part of the government of Sudan. The Famine Early Warning System warns that households in this region could face emergency levels of food insecurity through the 2016 dry season. In addition, civilian infrastructure including schools, medical facilities and markets have also been targeted. While this conflict has taken a tremendous toll on the population as a whole, the ways in which both it and its consequences are experienced are gendered. The toll taken by the conflict on both men and women is informed by the cultural and social constructions of gender that existed before the war, even as these necessarily shift in this period of crisis.

In her work "Gender Politics and Islamization in Sudan," Sondra Hale comments that, "...gender is an indispensable concept in the analysis of political-cultural movements, of transition, and of social change. Itself a function of uneven development and social change—that we see the politicization of gender, the family, and the position of women." Thus, gender is not a synonym for women, but considers both women and men and their interdependent relationships. Although reporting on the conflict in on-going, there has been little attention to producing a gendered analysis of both the conflict and its consequences on individuals, families and communities. This study is intended as a starting point for addressing this gap. The paper highlights a number of key issues, which warrant serious consideration by all actors and stakeholders, regional power brokers, and civil society groups working in and/or outside of Nuba Mountains.

This paper attempted to broadly examine the gender specific realities of life amidst conflict in the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM/A-N) controlled areas of the Nuba Mountains of Sudan, with a special emphasis on the diverse voices of Nuba men and women. The paper seeks to provide critical knowledge about gender inequalities and the related roles and responsibilities of women and girls. Furthermore it serves to provide guidance in the various aid and civil society sectors and their gender equality interaction of food security, protection and peace-building, and to explore questions of access to key services and resources for women and girls with the aim of identifying elements either restricting or permitting access.

Methodology

Throughout the research, a qualitative methodological approach was employed. The research began with an extensive analysis of the available literature on Nuba Mountains, and gender relations in the context of conflict. The main mechanism of data collection, however, was the conduct of focus groups. Although a preliminary focus group guide was developed for each of the discussions, as well as an ideal profile (age, gender) of participants, the format was open. Researchers encouraged participants to exchange and share, whether or not the comments were directly tied to the topic at hand. This contributed to the quality of the focus groups and revealed findings that were not anticipated during the planning of the research.

A researcher worked closely with a Nuba-based translator to pose guiding questions and permit discussions to maintain a natural flow. What emerged, as is typical with qualitative methodology, were nuances, sometimes contradictory, and detailed descriptions of what it means to be a women or girl in Nuba Mountains. The discussions gave in-depth insights on the women and girls' unique contributions and the challenges to their well-being, whether related to the conflict itself, culture and traditional practices, or, most often, a combination of factors. Additionally, as is common when qualitative methods are applied, the research revealed findings applicable outside of the boundaries of the immediate subject area, which are of particular value given the paucity of quality data emerging from the region in general, more specifically in reference to gender relations and disparities experienced by Nuba women and girls.

The focus groups were all conducted in the Nuba Mountains in April 2015. Some occurred in the regional capital, Kauda, but the majority were conducted in areas heavily affected by the on-going conflict, in Umdorein and Delami counties. Locations where focus groups were conducted were scouted by partners, and were chosen to permit safe and open discussions. Focus groups were typically 1.5 to two hours in duration. The focus groups were frequently interrupted, sometimes not resumed, when bombing by the Sudanese Air Force (SAF) became too intense to ensure informant security; as both Umdorein and Delami are located in close proximity to active front lines, and have been severely affected by SAF bombing. The timing of the research coincided with the Sudanese presidential election, widely opposed throughout Sudan, but not conducted at all in the rebel held areas, where the electoral commission did not have access. Bombing and ground campaigns targeting civilians are a hallmark of the conflict and continued while the research was being conducted. Aerial bombardment increased in frequency during daylight hours and intense short and long range artillery battles

raged at night. Locations of fox holes and mountain cover areas were noted and frequently used during focus group discussions. Despite these challenges, all anticipated focus groups, even those that had to be rescheduled, relocated or otherwise modified to maintain a basic level of security for the informants and the research team were conducted.

Further information was also gathered through key informant interviews, conducted with members of the SPLM/A-N administration, civil society actors, and other respected community members. Additionally, the research was informed by a number of capacity building activities as well as "gender" trainings conducted. Overall, the research permitted the collection of experiences of over 250 civilians in Nuba Mountains.

Limitations of the Research

The research process was limited at several levels by the occurrence of active armed conflict in the region. Some of these were logistical, as movement of personnel was limited and access of certain locations restricted by the local administration due to risks induced by the conflict situation. Locating secure venues for focus group discussions presented a hurdle to be overcome. The two primary research locations are areas of active conflict, and as such, there was a strong military presence in the general area, if not in immediate surroundings where focus groups were held. This is largely unavoidable in Nuba Mountains. To their credit, focus group participants showed a high level of openness. Nonetheless, in zones under the control of a military force, we can assume that some things remain unsaid. Likewise, as focus group discussions were also sometimes conducted in the presence of local leaders and influential persons related to the delivery of assitance, it is likely that there was a certain degree of self-censorship regarding the opinions of informants regarding assitance. This is not to say that claims of satisfaction are not credible. In fact, the comments made by informants on the quality of relief they receive and the means by which they are selected to receive it were well-informed and overwhelmingly positive. However, there is often, as the researchers have experienced in other contexts, a tendency for communities depending on assitance, to fear that any criticism for service delivery, even where such criticism is intended as constructive, could endanger their access to services.

Probably the most formidable limitation of the research is the socio-political context in the Nuba Mountains. One must place oneself in the shoes of a civilian living in besieged territory, arguably an impossible task, to begin to understand the sensitivity and stakes of voicing their opinions and recounting their experiences.

There are limits on the ability of civilians to relate to researchers, whether of Sudanese or foreign origins. As in other contexts where support to a movement or a shared goal can lead to an unwillingness to critique those at the forefront of pursuing that goal, even where that requires accepting curtailing civil liberties, civilians in and from Nuba are hesitant to criticise the SPLM/A-N because they necessarily pin their hopes and well-being so significantly to SPLM/A-N success. Some respondents described their difficulties in approaching gender-related injustices within the SPLM/A-N structures to researchers in private. Though respondents in all locations did exhibit a significant openness and an ability to share their experiences, the research would be amiss in not clearly stating that there is a clear limit to the topics and types of discussion civilians in Nuba Mountains were willing to engage in, and, it must be said, the topics and types of discussions that researchers in the field, equally dependant on SPLM/A-N security and cooperation, were willing to attempt to elicit during focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

Nuba Women's Struggle for Rights and Equality

Sudan is a country with limited space for women to exercise their civil, political and human rights. Patriarchal social structures, in addition to politics, conflict, and religion, have left women's voices largely absent from decision-making. The traditional exclusion of women has been exacerbated by recurrent conflict and political turmoil over the past decades, which has left little room for women to claim their rights. For over the last two decades, Sudan has been ruled by a regime which pins its legitimacy on militant interpretations of Islam and underpinned by the heavy hand of the Sudanese military and aligned militia, which challenge any opportunity for women and girls to exercise their rights and to enjoy equality. Despite these challenges, women in Sudan continue to work to gain influence over, and access to, political and social fora that affect their well-being and that of their fellow Sudanese. Yet, even in so doing women are often viewed as a shadow of their male counterparts. Women's political participation remains more symbolic, than seriously integrated into the political agenda, policies and legislation. Commitments to acknowledge women's human rights and equality are yet to be implemented in earnest, both inside and outside of Sudan's zones of conflict.
Alongside the aforementioned obstacles to women exercising their rights, Sudan is also a country where ethnic identity and cultural background are central in determining access to resources and basic rights such as education and wealth. The case of the Nuba Mountains presents one example of the convergence of issues of gender and ethnic identity, and is illustrative of the costs Sudan's indigenous people pay in resisting the increasingly violent and restrictive policies and actions of the Sudanese state.

The Nuba Mountains are located within Southern Kordofan State, bordering South Sudan. Under current administration the region is divided into five provinces, namely Kadugli, Dilling, Rashad, Abu Jibeha and Talodi. The conflict ridden state is home to an estimated population of one million inhabitants, the vast majority of whom are either displaced or severely affected by the on-going conflict. As of September 2015, neighbouring South Sudan had received over 250,000 refugees from the region.[1] The inhabitants are commonly known as the Nuba, comprised of an ethnically diverse people, who speak at least 50 different local languages and have three dominant religious beliefs, Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion. Despite this significant heterogeneity, the Nuba share a number of fundamental common cultural practices and beliefs, and, widely recognize themselves as Nuba.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s into the present, the elites from Nuba Mountains have strived to form civil-resistance movements and to gain

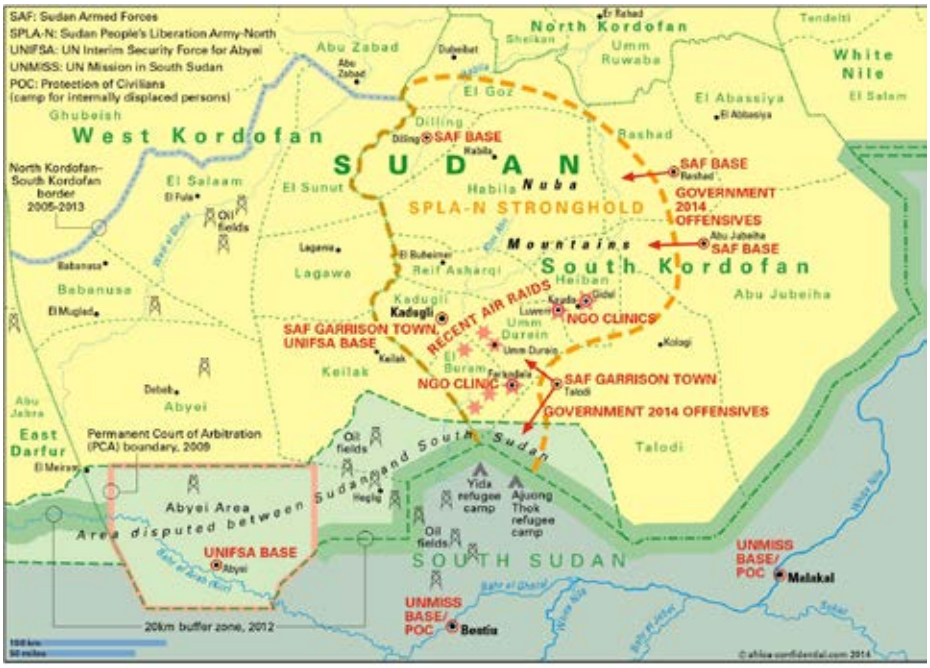


Figure 1: Map of South Kordofan

Resurgence of the conflict between the Sudanese government and the Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile-centred SPLM/A-N, which carries from 2011 into the present, has counteracted gains made across Nuba, particularly those made by women and women-led organs both within the SPLM/A-N and civil society.

recognition within the Sudanese state. This consistent resistance to the Sudanese state has resulted from a long history of marginalisation and unjust land policies. However, there is little evidence of genuine space for Nuba women within these movements for resistance to Sudanese state oppression. The SPLM was formed in 1983 around a manifesto calling for an inclusive and equal Sudan for all marginalised groups. The SPLM benefited from broad support of Nuba elites, including some educated Nuba women.

During the five years which followed the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), there was an era of relative peace in the Nuba Mountains. Many women and men who had fled the previous conflict returned home, striving to reconnect with their homeland and communities and drive development and political reorganisation. As in other regions of the world, Nuba women endeavoured during this early recovery period to organise platforms for political and economic engagement.

This was a time of significant mobilisation of civil society and development resources across Nuba Mountains, with many of these processes benefiting from the engagement of women, and uniquely effective in leading peace-building and recovery efforts.

However, resurgence of the conflict between the Sudanese government and the Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile-centred SPLM/A-N, which carries from 2011 into the present, has counteracted gains made across Nuba, particularly

those made by women and women-led organs both within the SPLM/A-N and civil society. Communities in the Nuba Mountains have been devastated by the re-eruption of the brutal fighting in the region. For the second time in less than a decade, the Nuba Mountains were turned into a battleground, causing heavy casualties among movements for political and social change as well as movements promoting equality and women's access to political and social influence.

Realities of the Current Conflict

Described by the *New York Times'* Adam Ellick as "The Worst Atrocity You've Never Heard Of," the Nuba Mountains returned to full-scale conflict in 2011. The conflict has been marked by a disregard for civilian life by Sudan's government forces, which have failed to distinguish between civilians and combatants and used disproportionate force in supressing the SPLM/A-N insurgents. [2] Since data began being kept on bombing in Southern Kordofan in 2012, more than 4,000 bombs have been dropped, with some villages being bombed over 300 times, leading to significant civilian casualties. [3] The Sudan Consortium and National Human Rights Monitoring Organisation were able to independently verify 46 deaths and 140 injuries to civilians as a result of the bombing in 2015 alone. [4]

Monitors have reported a high number of attacks on civilian infrastructure, including farmland, communal grain mills, areas with high percentages of displaced persons, locations of provision of medical care, functioning civilian markets, churches, mosques and schools. In addition, attacks increase at the time of planting and harvesting, indicating a deliberate strategy to disrupt food production. This has led to catastrophic outcomes for the rural Nuba communities, particularly those living within the SPLM/A-N controlled territories, disrupting the entirety of life in Nuba Mountains. Evidence that this is part of a deliberate plan was forwarded by Eric Reeves, who reprinted what appeared to be leaked government minutes, "We have instructed the Air Force to bomb any place, whether it is a school, hospital, or a nongovernmental organization operating in rebel-controlled areas without permission from the government. Such presence is offensive and should be destroyed."[5] Although we are not in position to verify the authenticity of the document, its words are chilling.

Since the resurgence of the conflict, the Sudanese government has routinely bombed civilian areas, mostly using Antonov cargo planes and Ilyushin 76 jets operating out of Sudanese military airports. Evidence collected by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other actors demonstrated that the bombs being used include both "barrel bombs" and cluster munitions, both types of ordnance being considered inherently indiscriminate.[6] This has been the basis of an assessment by many that war crimes and crimes against humanity are occurring in Southern Kordofan. This is based on both the inherently indiscriminate nature of many of the weapons used, weapons that by their nature cannot be aimed with sufficient accuracy to ensure that they target military assets.

At the same time, there appears to be a deliberate attempt being made to target civilians living in areas where the SPLM/A-N is the controlling authority or their assets.[7]

"The planes have soured our life. Previously life was there and you could taste it! Now there is nothing at all to taste!" [8]

The conflict has severely limited access to basic commodities and any form of assistance. This situation is complicated further by the political and military intimidation imposed by the Sudanese regime on bordering South Sudan state as well as the fact that the Nuba Mountains are geographically isolated, making the transport of such commodities in from the outside challenging. In this situation, geography is complicated by the fact that SPLM/A-N areas are cut off from government-controlled areas by the front lines and transport in of goods from South Sudan have to contend with the civil conflict which has been ongoing there since 2013. In addition, the government of Sudan has blocked access to the area, citing concern about the possible diversion of assistance to the rebel forces. While restricted assistance efforts are operating under severe scrutiny in the Nuba Mountain, this has put significant strain on the Nuba Mountains population living within SPLM/A –N controlled areas. Areas of the Nuba Mountains controlled by the Sudanese government equally remained largely deprived of assistance with the possible exception to this being the Sudanese Red Crescent Society, which is widely assumed to operate far outside of the realm of standards of independent and impartial humanitarian aid.

Almost five years of diplomatic and advocacy efforts to facilitate humanitarian access to the conflict zones through Sudan in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile have been unsuccessful. Continued targeting of civilians has increased food insecurity, hindered access to clean drinking water and healthcare and has deeply disrupted livelihoods, including agriculture and markets. Where civilians have been internally displaced, they have often been confronted with a lack of arable or fertile land for farming and many fears to enter their fields to cultivate due to insecurity. In the words of one,

As a political organisation, the SPLM/A-N can be described as male dominated institution. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that it is entrenched in, and relies upon support from the local population, particularly from rural Nuba communities, whose culture is characterised by a patriarchal social order. Over the years, the SPLM/A-N has espoused a rhetoric of gender equality and recognition of women's roles. Formative documents of the movement, including founding manifestos, refer specifically to notions of gender equality and equal representation. However this rhetoric has arguably not led to any substantive progress for women9 within political structures of the movement or Nuba society in SPLM/A-N controlled territories more broadly. The SPLM/A-N remains a traditional, male-dominated, and militarised movement with no clear agenda for delivering on their rhetorical commitments to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Many would argue that the desperation of the situation in which the SPLM/A-N and its constituencies find themselves and the need for immediate survival outweigh the imperative for progress on gender equality, leaving this issue necessarily relegated to the side lines

until the conflict subsides. This is a slippery slope argument, given the length of the conflict and the concurrent lack of progress on gender equality that can be observed in the Nuba Mountains. The SPLM/A-N leadership and political structures as well as the culture of the organisation and its patterns of political discourse and engagements remain to a large extent gender-blind and with strong patriarchal tendencies.

While this paper does not identify gender disparities and inequality within the SPLM/A-N as main drivers of the current violent conflict, it does argue that gender disparities experienced by those living under SPLM/A-N control adversely affect Nuba people as a whole. Gender equality[10] and peace are closely linked: while peace is vital to promote gender equality, gender inequality can also undermine peace and drive conflict and violence. In the case at hand, gender inequality cannot only compromise opportunities for real peace-building, it could also undermine the viability of the SPLM/A-N movement.

Unless gender inequality is specifically addressed, communities living with conflict and gender disparities will continue to suffer inequalities even in subsequent periods of peace. As United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 states, "Where cultures of violence and discrimination against women and girls exist prior to conflict, they will be exacerbated during conflict times. If women do not participate in the decision-making structures of a society, they are unlikely to become involved in decisions about the conflict or the peace process that follows." This unfortunately accurately describes the situation for women and girls in areas [11] under SPLM/A-N control in Nuba Mountains. Women and girls remain embedded in traditional roles, disempowered both in the household and in political spheres. Despite being the base of the SPLM/A-N and the Nuba community's survival, they remain largely marginalised and lack concrete influence over the political and social organisation that affects their lives and their well-being.

Gender and Livelihoods in Wartimes

Unless gender inequality is specifically addressed, communities living with conflict and gender disparities will continue to suffer inequalities even in subsequent periods of peace.

One of the primary observations of this research is that the women of Nuba Mountains are caught between their traditional gender roles, which they are expected to perform despite the misery and hardship of the conflict, and the new set of responsibilities deriving from living in conflict. Some of these are viewed as uniquely feminine, including carrying out increased levels of "care work". In addition, women may be forced to take on traditionally male roles in agriculture and other economic activities since their male counterparts are unable to fulfil their traditional roles in sustaining families because of military obligations, injury, lack of opportunity, or other reasons.

Unfortunately, the list of "added responsibilities" does not typically lead to increased political participation or decision-making power, nor is it typically remunerated. While there is an expectation that the roles of men on the front lines will be celebrated, the struggles of women to maintain the home are not recognised in the same way. As one woman summed it up:

When our men visit us, they think they should be honoured as a guest. They think that if we have a surviving animal that is should be killed on their arrival so they can eat well. Then they return to their work on the front. [12]

Women interviewed for the research commented frequently that they are meant to navigate the terror of war, maintain a home, find a way to feed children, and to do so while maintaining overwhelmingly traditional and often disempowered roles, both in the SPLM/A-N structure as well as in broader Nuba culture. As one woman summed it up, ***"We do the work and we have the knowledge of the home, but nothing is our say in the end. Even the young wives are in bondage under this old system that we use."***[13]

Shifting Gender Roles

During times of peace in traditional Nuba culture, women took care of children and handled domestic work tasks such as food preparation, contributing to plot farming, with children contributing to collecting firewood and grazing cattle. Traditional roles, however, have shifted and "care work" has become more difficult in a context of scarcity. As one example, one woman reflected on access to water:

The impact is not gender neutral. Gender inequalities in access to educations predate the conflict. With the Nuba Mountains being a traditional society, girls tend to be more disadvantaged in regard to schooling.

Water is a big problem for us. If I use too much water to bathe my children, my husband might beat me or make me go back to get more water. If I don't use it and have dirty children, my husband might say 'You are an irresponsible wife' and abandon me or find someone else. So I'm trapped. [13]

The ability to educate children has also been strained. Education became a growing priority for both boys and girls within Nuba communities before the conflict. With the onset of the conflict, education of children generally has become difficult. Nonetheless, women are continuing to push for it: "Without me pushing for school, my husband would never have thought of it as important." [14]

Women viewed the loss of an ability to send their children to school as not only bad for Nuba culture and progress but indicative of a failure to meet their responsibilities and a source of strain on them: ***"We have an entire group of children with no education at all. Even if the war ends tomorrow, we still have no educated generation to build up with."*** [15]

Even so, the impact is not gender neutral. Gender inequalities in access to education predate the conflict. With the Nuba Mountains being a traditional society, girls tend to be more disadvantaged in regard to schooling. An increasing number of girls attended school prior to the conflict, but the onset of conflict, and the scarcity that has come with it, has led to de-prioritisation of girls' education.

In the words of one woman:
Before, girls and boys and all children could go to school equally. Now we are forced to pick the ones to educate, if any at all, and the ones to keep at home. Because girls have more responsibilities at home, they are usually left out of classes. [16]

Women, however, viewed this as problematic: ***"We have to pretend that we are happy to have one boy in school, even as the girls remain uneducated."*** [17]

One reason for this insistence on education is that this has a protective effect on girls. In the words of one interviewee: ***"Very simply, if a girl is in school she won't get married. If she isn't in school she will consider the option [of marriage]."*** [18]
As noted above, traditional roles have been re-engineered in times of conflict to

correspond with military needs and the goal of promoting the broader SPLM/A-N movement. Women's inclination towards "care" work in traditional Nuba culture has been superimposed over conflict-based needs. The gender distinction of conflict roles has been recognised, for example, in Amani El Jack's report on gender in armed conflict, "...men are soldiers or aggressors and women are wives, mothers, nurses, social workers and sex-workers." [19] In the context of the Nuba Mountains women have taken on roles such as administering field-level first aid, foraging for food and medicines to heal the wounded, visiting of families mourning their dead and even participating in burying of bodies and the digging of defensive "fox holes." These roles contribute to civilian survival as well as the continued relevance of the SPLM/A-N movement in times of scarcity and significant challenges on both military and political fronts. In short, the "care work" carried out traditionally by women has been expanded, and the lines between the work women do to support their household and the work women do to support the SPLM/A-N have become blurred.

It is evident that this expansion of responsibility in the agricultural is being added on to their ascribed gender roles, in which women's time and labour is concentrated in fulfilling the roles of nurturers and caretakers of the homes, and by extension of the community.

As noted above women's workloads have increased with the resumption of conflict. In part this is because tasks traditionally performed by children are taken on by women to ensure that children are as protected as possible in this volatile environment. In the words of one interviewee: ***"Children can't go out anywhere and are ordered to stay close to the home to prevent from getting hit by bombs or other trouble."*** [20] It was clear, however, that women were taking on additional roles at significant risk to themselves. In the words of one interviewee: ***"Many women are doing men's work, like building their houses, which leads to more risky movement for them."***[21] One woman described these risks in more detail: ***"When foraging, we are close to the Arabs (Sudanese military) and we go deep in the woods. There near the front you can be taken by force. But we need firewood so this risk remains."*** [22] In some cases, this was even seen as more risky than the military work carried out by men, ***"Men on the front are at least with weapons and able to protect themselves while they move."*** [23]

Interestingly, despite the contributions women are making to their homes and the broader SPLM/A-N cause, men remain, whether at home or on the front, the primary decision makers for all matters except small purchases. Most of the women interviewed during the course of this research said that they lacked negotiating power. When asked why, the majority cited a fear of violence or abandonment if they made the "wrong" decisions in their husbands' absence.

In the words of one woman, ***"If my husband was gone and I decided to do something important without consulting the brother, the brother would arrive at my house and call me irresponsible because I didn't seek him out first. If the decision I made ended up***

being the wrong one, both the brother and my husband would threaten me." [24]

In addition, in engaging in other remunerated business, women remain under the guardianship of men. These guardianship policies have grave implications for women's ability to achieve economic independence and a sense of well-being and opportunity. The conflict only makes this limitation of women's potential more formidable, but there is no guarantee that an end to conflict alone will enable economic and social mobility for women as is shown by the recent history of the CPA period.

Thus, it is not hyperbolic to state that women in Nuba remain on the "losing end" of negotiations for influence, independence, and autonomy. They remain obligated to carry out traditional care work, as well as assume responsibilities previously given to others. It remains problematically unclear whether or not this has led to any payoff in terms of women's ability to act without a male guardian, to make "big" decisions, or to gain more political or social status than traditional Nuba gender roles would allow. Equally troubling is the percentage of women's work that remains unremunerated. Whereas traditional male contributions to the war effort represent one of the only sources of remunerated labour in the region, the types of contributions made by women remain unremunerated. This is a hallmark of inequality in Nuba, and, given that the conflict is poised to continue, this "cornered" position of women will continue to become increasingly tight.

Agriculture & Livestock Rearing

In the pre-war context, farming was a viable and persistent livelihood strategy practiced by almost everyone in the community. Every family engaged in both larger scale crop farming in the fields, which produced both of food and cash crops and smaller scale backyard farming which focused on food production only. Allocations of land were typically made via a traditional system involving either inheritance or the delegation of a parcel of land to a particular person by a Sheikh, or traditional leader.[25] Importantly, notions of ownership were characterised by those most effectively using the land: labour such as clearing, tapping Acacia trees, etc. often distinguished persons as the rightful owners of land, with this designation formalised with consent from a Sheikh.[26] Thus, on one hand, because ownership of land was granted partially on the basis of capacity to use it, there was a certain openness and access to women in traditional Nuban culture. On the other hand, the role played by patriarchal inheritance structures and male dominated decision making by Sheikhs meant gender biases were very much built into the system. With the intentional and targeted destruction of Nuban farm land, as well as the mills and food stores, fertile land is increasingly scarce commodity, and thus, it is worth exploring how the conflict has influenced women's access to both agricultural land as well as the profits generated by their work on it.

The conflict is making traditional agriculture more and more difficult. Those interviewed for the research agreed that agriculture was the lifeblood of Nuba people. However, maintaining livelihoods in this way is becoming increasingly difficult. In some cases, this difficulty was created by lack of access to land. Men repeatedly remarked in focus groups that in many cases fertile land is now either controlled or threatened by the government of Sudan; This was a particularly important issue in Umdorein, where lands near Kadugli were viewed as uniquely fertile, but inaccessible due either to frequent bombing when located on rebel-held areas or to denied access when under control of the government of Sudan.

The difficulties posed by lack of access to land were exacerbated by the destruction of other agricultural resources. In particular, the destruction of milling facilities is a major impediment. In the words of one Nuban: ***The grinding mills are no longer working, which makes the maize impossible to digest. Even yesterday they hit the grinding mill in the field across from here and blew people up and made it even harder to find a place to mill the maize or sorghum we need. When the bombers target the mills, they are clever because the mills have a tank of fuel next to them to power it. Then the destruction is bigger than just the bomb itself.***[27]

In other cases, it is the food stores themselves that are destroyed. As one interviewee put it, ***"It's like they [the SAF] know where we are keeping our food. No matter where the sorghum is hid, the bombs are finding it."*** [28]

Others pointed out that the hardship had forced some to beg and this caused considerable suffering and shame:

Nuba people are agriculture people. Now that we cannot carry out agriculture, we have intensified our foraging and home gardening when possible. Another way we cope without our usual agriculture is a shame; sometimes we have to ask our neighbours for food. This is especially the case for older persons.[29]

Some commented that they found other occupations and means of contributing (such as petty trade) while others affirmed that larger scale agriculture was their only way of contributing and this was now at the least a dangerous option, if not an impossible one.

In this strained context, and with large numbers of men being occupied with fighting, traditional cultivation methods are changing. In addition, the number of households headed by women has increased, which correlates with an increase in women's responsibilities. Women have moved from responsibility for small garden plots to taking on the traditionally male responsibility for cultivating farm land. This has not, however, come with increased influence over what is done with the food grown – which for the majority of Nubans remains at the subsistence level – or any profits made.

It is evident that this expansion of responsibility in the agricultural is being added on to their ascribed gender roles, in which women's time and labour is concentrated in fulfilling the roles of nurturers and caretakers of the homes, and by extension of the community.

Even so, within the realm of cultivation, where women are now more engaged, a gendered division of labour persists. For instance, while women now work the land, they are primarily involved in time and labour intensive tasks such as seed selection, planting, weeding, harvesting and storage.

Men do not typically contribute to seed cultivation and women are largely responsible for the initial clearing of fields, including removing any large trees. In sorghum cultivation, women's essential role comes during the harvest period, when, often through nafir (collective farming work), women band together in groups to cut down sorghum stalks one-by-one, "clean" them in the field, and carry them home to be dried and then to market. Although the idea that nafir was communal and gender inclusive was forwarded by some, this was questioned by other participants. "It is rubbish to call nafir in this area shared work. Where are the men? There is no balance to it. This is still women's work." [30]

And while both women and men expend their labour on productive activities, it is mostly men are involved in the sale of agricultural outputs (even when we see women in markets, the income from their sales are still largely controlled by men), meaning that women have little or no control over the income from the land and their labour. In addition, men are the primary owners of or otherwise hold control of key assets – including land, livestock, equipment and other inputs. Thus, although women input significant labour, control of incomes from both rests exclusively with men: "The contribution we get from a good crop of sorghum is a new roof on our house and hopefully a grain stock with enough sorghum in it. Sometimes the men sell too much of it and sacrifice our own supply for cash which we never see."[31]

The power to decide on distribution and utilisation of resources is a critical precursor in determining who wields political power and social capital in the community. Therefore, women's dispossession in the ownership and control of primary productive resources impacts directly on their recognition, voice and participation in the social, political and cultural activities of the community. In other words, women have to work if at all their families and communities are to survive, but their tremendous work contributes to neither social nor financial status. This creates an exploitative structure of work.

Some women commented that in war time, their access to even the home garden, and the gains made there, have been uncharacteristically curtailed, due to scarcity.

As men and women play different roles in cultivation, they also play different roles in regard to husbandry, a major means of livelihood in Nuba society. With access limited, natural remedies to build animal health are necessary. The animal health local administration works on a local level to both promote natural remedies for animal health. Although women are represented in these activities, they are definitely a minority. Interviews revealed the fact that women are widely perceived as unable to make decisions in this sector. A representative of the local administration commented that

women are under-represented across the livestock sector, agreeing with the view expressed by women, that raising cattle is perceived as a man's occupation, although this perception is less pronounced with regard to raising other forms of livestock. He commented that household responsibilities of women might be a contributing factor to this. A potential remedy, he suggested, would be the intensification of poultry production, which (unlike cattle) occurs at home and does not require significant movement. This would also create spaces for women to be active in the sector and might open up resources for more "women-friendly" livestock options. Furthermore, raising cattle, particularly in a time of conflict, has other disadvantages: they need more water, require movement for grazing, and require drug and vaccination inputs that are currently unavailable.

Furthermore, the same representative of the local administration expressed doubts about the ability of women to control and benefit from the proceeds for the sale of cattle. The role that the local administration can play in redressing gender biases in this area should be explored as part of the response to conflict.

Access and Control of Resources

The research observed a willingness in the population to share available resources among households that is surprising in the context of such extreme hardship. In some cases, those who benefitted from assistance programs showed willingness to share with those not benefitting directly from these programs. In the words of one interviewee, "Sharing is a natural gesture. One gives little amounts of cash, seeds, vegetables, and soap … whatever to a neighbour in need.'

However on an individual household level, such collectivist thought is not present, due at least in part to discriminatory attitudes towards women. The inequalities and power relations borne of patriarchy are evident in the communities and demonstrate the subordination of women, particularly in terms of how the scarcest resource, cash, is controlled and used. Women mentioned this as fundamentally an unequal situation: "Husbands here [Nuba] are tough. We can garden together, harvest together. But in the end the money is never mine."

Men reported that, particularly when they were absent, women make decisions, including spending cash, freely.

The only area where women consistently recognised their own decision-making power on cash assets was regarding the income generated from their backyard farming. 11 out of 15 participants of the focus group discussion stated that they would be free to decide over the usage of such proceeds, as long as the household generally would benefit, as e.g. from items such as salt and soap.

Despite the inequity of decision making around cash expenditure in the home, women were not simple victims of inequality, but rather bear agency, which they strategically put to use. For instance, the phenomenon of women "hiding" money, rather than putting cash on the table to discuss with men openly, was reported at all sites, demonstrating not only perceptions about women's authority over household spending, but also women's efforts to redress this. 10 out of 10 in one focus group in Delami said they have to hide money

Differing Perspectives on Resources and Decision Making

Women on Money

"If it is my money, I still have to seek a man's consultation on how to spend it, even though I already have the best idea of what is really needed in the house."

"How can I ask a man to explain to me, a woman, how he intends to spend? It is impossible."

"Yes, of course women use the cash differently. They are more economical and when money is in their hands it usually benefits everyone equally. Men are sometimes drinkers and proud to have something in their pocket even if it goes quickly."

"It's like nature. Men are proud and not humble, and like to use cash to welcome friends, spend on themselves, and demonstrate that they have something. For women, their focus in on the home, as this is the only way they can raise their status."

Men on Money

"Decisions can't wait for men to be home, thus the women are free to use their judgment on big and small decisions."

"When cash comes into the household, women negotiate with us. It's the first step."

"like a criminal" from their husbands, rather than being transparent about the household income and "having a fair discussion with my husband about the available money for all the things I need." [32]

Unfortunately, women had few or no ideas on how to improve their influence and role in the household besides "being useful," "organised," and "experienced" but almost unanimously found the cultural restrictions as a key blockage to gender equity, something which informs decision making in all aspects of life. In the words of one woman:

Our experience is not important. For large decisions, they are never ours to make even if we have more knowledge and have made wise decisions in the past."

Gender & Access to different forms of Assistance

Analyses have praised the women of the Nuba Mountains for developing strong coping mechanisms to handle the scarcity of resources, and aid agencies are correct to consider these strengths in provision of services. However, aid delivery that does not recognise vulnerability in gendered terms, women's lack of control over resources, women's minimal engagement in decision making and overall social subordination, will fail to achieve gender equality.

The Sudanese regime has been consistent and forceful in blocking humanitarian agencies from operating inside the SPLM/A-N controlled territories. At the time of this research, efforts at mediating an agreement to allow access had been widely unsuccessful. As a result, external aid is scarce. This commodity starved environment, exacerbates the need to exert influence and exacerbates gender biases which disadvantage women and girls.

Aid actors around the world and local NGOs constantly emphasize and advocate for equal access to aid food and non-food items. Despite the fact that the language of 'gender mainstreaming' has become the norm, assitance agencies work in a social and cultural context that impacts on their ability to deliver in a gender inclusive and equitable way. In the Nuba Mountains, this social and cultural context is characterized by long-standing gender inequality. Analyses have praised the women of the Nuba Mountains for developing strong coping mechanisms to handle the scarcity of resources, and actors are correct to consider these strengths in considering assistance. However, any form of assistance that does not recognize vulnerability in gendered terms, women's lack of control over resources, women's minimal engagement in decision making and overall social subordination, will fail to achieve gender equality.

Despite improvements to assistance (e.g. complaint mechanisms, increased involvement of women in programming and delivery channels), gender disparities in accessing forms of assistance are evident across the Nuba Mountains. Men and women had different views in terms of their priorities for the type and mode of delivery of assistance. Most men agreed that night-time to receive assistance was ideal. Women however, argued that this increased their vulnerability. Long lines to receive small forms of assistance served to disadvantage them, as women said; they detracted them from their responsibilities at home.

Men, interestingly, said that it was primarily women and girls that would wait in long lines, both because of some of assistance actor's preferences as well as the apparent "natural order" which indicated that women and girls are more suitable for this type of task. Interestingly, none of the men interviewed even raised the option that, to reduce night-time vulnerability of women or permit them to more effectively meet household demands, that the men might arrange to wait in distribution lines. Women made analogous comment about collecting water: ***"While men are in a deep sleep, we now get water at the pump and avoid being seen by the Antonovs."***[33] Thus, even when actors prioritize women as the card-holding collectors of assistance, they can indirectly do harm to women, who then have to decide between missing out on much-needed assistance or missing much-needed housework, as well as facing risks after support assistance is collected, especially when it is distributed at night. Men reported that women collecting assistance caused difficulties as women were often forced to leave their homes and kids for two to three hours, often returning at night.

Women unanimously agreed that proximity of the home for any form of assistance should be a key criterion in determining modes of delivery. This is because services that draw women away from the home expose them to risks and make the services less accessible. Additionally, the question of seasonality of service provision (during dry or rainy seasons) was also raised. During dry season, women said they experienced a lull in service offerings but they suggested that assistance provided at this time would be easier to access as there is a lull in the need for their labor. Balancing lean season needs (rainy period) and dry season opportunities presented by relatively reduced female workloads is key for gender sensitive programming.

In addition to the differences in opinion about modes of support, there are stark differences between what men and women prioritize in service provision. Many female participants considered seed provision as more useful than other types of assistance, since women could share them and put them to good use, especially with greater availability of tools for example. Some, however, argue that seeds had become less useful due to the bombing (which reduced access to productive land and brought down the value of seeds), as well as due to their decreasing influence over the proceeds from home gardens (discussed in more detail below).

Salt, oil and soap are limited, demonstrating the scarcity of basic commodities. When asked about whether profits of sorghum cultivation benefited women equally with men, women were divided. Those that produced small amounts said that it helped them as it went directly to their food stocks. Those with larger yields, however, commented that it did supply part of their household needs, but that men controlled the profit from any sorghum that was sold by the household.

The women were generally unaware of assessment procedures used by local NGOs prior to providing support and assistance, but when asked about selection criteria for inclusion in "beneficiary lists" (typically developed by the Sheikhs) most women were able to describe the process. A community meeting was generally held with all community members (non-gender segregated), and all were informed that a certain type of assistance was

becoming available. The member of local administration such as the Commissioners, Omdas, and Sheikhs were then consulted by the organization providing assistance. The women described how the Sheikh selected "very needy" households. The Sheikhs were viewed as a key link to receiving assistance: ***"After the information is given to the Sheikh by some community members, he can make the list of people who are in need and he goes to verify this list."*** [34]

Few women exhibited any disagreement with using the Sheikh or Omda (almost exclusively male positions across Nuba Mountains) as main part of beneficiary selection for receiving assistance, despite the exclusion of women from this position. Interviewees could recall only one instance of a female Sheikh, now deceased. Even this role was problematic, however, with one focus group participant reflecting, "When she walks home into her house, she's no longer a Sheikh." Despite the exclusion of women from this position, they saw the mechanism as relatively open. Most saw the Sheikhs or Omdas as well attuned to women's needs. In the words of one: ***"It's true that those who communicate most to the Sheikh are the men. But, if I had trouble or wanted to suggest something different to the Sheikh, I would not be fearful in doing so."***[35] Groups had no knowledge of any "training" provided to Sheikhs to guide beneficiary selection, but were not sure what criteria were used to make this determination and it is unclear whether the Sheikhs understand the ways in which war affects women differently than men. Further research is needed to assess whether or not the role of Sheikhs is undermining gender sensitivity in programming.

In summary, women and men in Nuba are accessing and responding to assistance in gendered ways. Seasonality, the work required to receive and use assistance and recipient decision making channels seemed areas where discussions highlighted gender imbalance and inequality. These challenges are not unknown to relevant actors in the region, but remain difficult to address given limited resources.

Gender Relations in Wartimes

There is no doubt that the armed conflict in the Nuba Mountains has had major implications on gender relations and that it has increased vulnerability of women to sexual and domestic violence. War has deep impacts on individual men and women's psyche as well as on the social and cultural and social dynamics that structure their communities. Responses to these impacts are gendered. War influences identities of men and women as members of a particular group. It affects their behaviour, which influences in turn the course of hostilities.

During times of peace in traditional Nuba culture women took care of children and handled domestic work tasks such as food manufacturing and preparation, contributing to plot farming, with children contributing to collecting firewood, and grazing cattle. Education, notably, was a growing priority for boys and girls within Nuba communities before the conflict, with increased normalization of both gender attending school prior to the conflict onset and the associated scarcity, which led to de-prioritization of girls' education.

In Nuba culture the tradition of marriage dowry, formally paid by a man's family to that of his future wife in advance of the marriage, has changed over time. The payment of dowry has been seen to have a negative impact on women as the commodification of the institution of the dowry, is linked to the commodification of women, who come to be considered as "goods" to be exchanged in the market for cows.[36] One effort made by the authorities in the Nuba Mountains to address this was a regulation passed in 2005 that restricted dowry exchanges to four head of cattle as well as a formal proclamation on women's right to consume meat, not always permitted in some portions of Nuba traditional society. It is necessary to consider the important social function (as a symbol of wealth and status) that dowry still plays in the community. If the 2005 regulation could be implemented, sensitisation and community outreach could be conducted to promote the notion that dowry is symbolic and not entirely cash oriented.

More recently, widespread scarcity has changed the dowry system. In particular, it has limited men's ability to use cattle for dowry.[37] Participants in the focus group discussions described how dowry was now often split into two payments, whereas before everything would be paid at once. The first payment was seen as a sign of good faith and the second represented the formal cementing of familial bonds. This allows men more time to gather the necessary resources. It would also appear that the amount of the dowry has been reduced. Men mentioned during focus groups that they actually preferred war-time marriages, as the expectations of the spouse's family were likely to be reduced in terms of both finances and goods, such as sugar, dishes, salt and

Pregnant and nursing women are particularly vulnerable to inadequate nutrition. This represents a double-edged sword for women in Nuba: not only are they pressured to have more children, but doing so is increasingly dangerous in times of scarcity.

other things which have been become difficult to obtain during the conflict. Ultimately, this made marriage cheaper. Although not explicitly stated during the focus groups, hints were made that lower dowry payments led to a perceived reduction of the "value" of women and girls entering into marriage.

Some focus group participants also pointed out that notwithstanding the change in dowry customs, there was a tendency on behalf of Nuba men to assume that once a dowry was paid, a woman lost her ability to speak for herself and lost independence. In the words of one woman: ***"We are wives. Our dowry has been paid. Why should we involve ourselves in men's decision-making?"*** [38]

Female participants also mentioned a reduced ability to negotiate family planning, something that was directly linked to changing behaviour of men in times of war: "The men view war as a good time for everyone to be pregnant. If we refuse sex we will be beaten. In earlier times, control over family planning was there. War makes men less patient and now they react with rage to family planning." [39]

Women expressed growing concern in regard to the absence of decision-making power in family planning. This was linked to general worries women had over their health as, as seen in many conflict contexts, households experiencing scarcity of nutrition often prioritised boys and men in the home, making women more vulnerable to malnutrition. Pregnant and nursing women are particularly vulnerable to inadequate nutrition. This represents a double-edged sword for women in Nuba: not only are they pressured to have more children, but doing so is increasingly dangerous in times of scarcity.

In the face of this dilemma, some women raised the possibility of practicing family planning in secret, without the consent of their husbands. This was a means of controlling family size and household needs, as well as reducing vulnerability to malnutrition in pregnancy and lactation, but this was said to put women at risk of being abandoned or abused if they were viewed as infertile. As one woman described the dilemma:

We can either not take the tablets and have too many kids or take them and then have the risk of being abandoned because the husband thinks we are not fertile anymore. Also, if he finds the box that I hid I'm sure to be beaten for not telling him. If I tell him, he'll forbid it and probably still abuse me. [40]

The fear of abandonment has become more acute during the conflict, as men, particularly those involved in military operations, experience high degrees of mobility, whereas women's mobility is extremely limited.

In the words of one woman:
"My husband left two years ago to go to Yida after finishing making these children. He doesn't ask about me, send money, or request that I come to Yida to live with him. I'm abandoned." [41]

One focus group revealed that 15 out of the 16 present considered fear of abandonment a major factor in making decisions or "speaking out" against a husband's wishes. The wrong decision, it was said, would lead to abandonment, which was considered by all to be worse than physical violence.

Polygamy, which is widespread in Nuba Mountains, further complicates women's opportunity to raise concerns with their partners or otherwise have their voices heard. Many felt that men in Nuba Mountains, particularly those who are mobile, have "many options" in regards to wives, whereas women are in a position of increased need for protection. As one woman put it: ***"My husband has many wives. Some are more obedient than others. I myself have to modify my reaction to events because I am afraid in these times to be on my own."***[42]

Domestic violence against women is a critical issue and was raised frequently in discussions related to the inner-workings of families and gender dynamics. Quarrelling in the home was viewed as risky, as it could easily develop into physical and emotional abuse. Many attributed increased rates of domestic violence to the increased stress of living amid bombardment as well as to men's experiences on the frontlines during the course of the conflict. As one woman put it, ***"Men tend to drink more and tend to beat their wives more."*** [43]

Some mentioned that husbands' demand for sex increased and that it was a way to ease men's minds in times of stress and insecurity even if the women were not feeling up to it. They reported that refusal could lead to violence. In the words of one woman: ***"Men are traumatized and don't care about the consequences of sex. Their mood is bad now. Refusal of sex will lead to a beating. As for myself, I already have six kids."*** [44]

Women deployed a number of coping strategies to avoid domestic violence. Some women had resorted to "screaming to neighbours" to protect them from men demanding sex. Women mentioned that, beyond this, their "patience and knowledge of their husbands' difficulties" were important ways of protecting themselves from threatening behaviours in the home. Maintaining calm in the household, most women agreed, depended on women's patience and knowledge of how to "cool their husbands down" when stress levels peaked. In so doing, women often had to sacrifice their own ability to decide whether or not they want to have sex. Another form of protection against violence raised by women was the possibility of speaking with the parents of the husband in cases where abuse became frequent. In this context, a number of people (7 out of 15 in the focus group in question) identified displaced persons as uniquely vulnerable to abuse, as they were often separated from these extended family structures, and thus the protection they provided.

Thus, the core aspects of family life (marriage, decisions to have children) in Nuba Mountains have become increasingly perilous for women, and increasingly inequitable. Because of immediate fears of abandonment and violence, whether physical or sexual, as well as sympathy they expressed for the trauma experienced by men, particularly those fighting on the front lines, women's voice and influence within their homes is being eroded.

The Fight with Trauma

In work conducted by Jody El-Bushra in 1998, it was suggested that a gender approach to conflict analysis might lead to a deeper understanding of why people support, carry out, or stand against violence. Developing such an understanding would involve, on the one hand, describing the impacts of war on individual men and women and on their communities, and their gendered responses to these effects. On the other hand, it would mean examining how far their identity as male and female members of a particular group influences their behaviour, and how far this behaviour in turn influences the course of hostilities. [45] This approach can be particularly useful in analysing the ways in which men and women respond to stress and trauma.

While carrying out the research women were asked to describe what a sense of "well-being" meant to them. They listed: "feeling comfortable," "eating what you want," "being able to access schools," "when life is simple," "having clothes," and "having husband at home." The opposite was described as: "Not hearing the language of a partner, someone to speak to you lovingly," "seeing your young ones die off;" "Previously, salt, sugar, oil, and soap were available here. That made well-being high. Even medicine would be found when it was needed;" "Having cows that you own is a sign of well-being. Now even the chickens have been destroyed by the bombs, never mind the cows." [46]

Living under near constant bombardment, being cut off from resources, suffering through civilian casualties and displacement, and other experiences common in the Nuba Mountains bring with them considerable stress and trauma for both men and women. However men and women identified the sources of trauma differently. Reactions to trauma are also distinct and gendered. Some of men's reactions and strategies for coping with trauma were referenced above and have costly impacts on women and families.

All women and men agreed that shelling and Antonov bombings were the most persistent risk they experienced. In the words of one: "The risk here is all about the planes." [47] Aside from the bombardment, however, sources of trauma varied. Much of the trauma men experienced was related to front line experiences. Depression as a result of their lost status in the home as breadwinner and provider was also cited as traumatic. On the other hand, women's trauma was linked in part to the disruption of the pre-war division of labour, and women's inclination to assume additional risks in assuming responsibilities formerly assigned to men. Women faced the fear of conducting day-to-day work, and an accompanying fear that if they did not work, the household would suffer. A deeply revealing discussion was held

in one of the focus groups, where this source of trauma, experienced by women on a regular basis was clearly described:

Sometimes I can be in the field, and my wife has to bring me food so I can work. Now she hears the Antonov. Her worries are about her field and me in it, herself as she walks, and our house and kid that she left behind to bring me food. These are a woman's worries. [48]

The scenario participants presented was one of general overwork of women in the new division of labour in Nuba, conflicting obligations, and the overarching fear of aerial bombardment that shades all experiences in Nuba in the present context. In the words of one interviewee:

Movement is a woman's risk. Think of all the movement women do that men don't, even when bombing is happening all day. Grinding, getting water, getting firewood, taking kids to school. Men can sit all day if they want, they can even live in the caves, but if a woman stays still, the household will fail.

Women added to the list of risks associated with trauma included the following array: Not being able to fix ones house; lack of available cash; lack of a Sheikh (for displaced women); children breathing poison chemicals from bombs; lack of hospitals in which to deliver children. Interestingly, conducting activities in groups was viewed both as a potential protection and as a potential risk, and so group activities not necessarily considered less traumatic. The laundry-list of fear and therefore trauma-inducing phenomena that women listed illustrated their generally overburdened position.

In addition to identifying different sources of trauma, men and women identified different reaction to stress. Women mentioned that men were susceptible to "bad behaviour and thoughts" after experiencing violence on the front. One interviewee gave additional detail:

Men tend to drink more, tend to beat their wives more. We also lose our authority. Our sons can be like street boys who don't feel happy around their father anymore. We lose our father and husbands 'voice' as well, maybe because of drinking or traumatic experiences. Even our sons can openly disobey us, refuse to go to school even if we can pay, refuse to tend to cows carefully. [49]

A number of coping mechanisms, specific to men were also cited. One was a ceremony in which a pig is killed and the distressed soldier is covered with pig's blood, as a means of overcoming this type of mental trauma and restoring a husband's "good behaviour." Another practice involved the ingestion of lemon juice to the point of vomiting and pouring cold water over someone as a means of relieving war trauma.

While trauma was a problem for both men and women, women were seen to cope better. In the words of one male interviewee:

Trauma is becoming a problem. People in trauma can even abandon their kids without knowing it is wrong. They can neglect their agriculture and starve themselves and their kids. The community is not well-established anymore, because trauma is making people behave differently than normal. In general, women are dealing better than us. They keep their wisdom better than men. [50]

Whereas men seemed to externalize trauma, rely on external remedies (alcohol, lemons, acting violence), responding to trauma for women seemed a deeply internal/personal issue. One woman's comment on the loss of a partner, and therefore the loss of a confidant which could assist her in dealing with trauma, was as poignant as it was revealing of the situation of women in Nuba:

For me, the idea of losing love and partnership is serious. Men are losing their minds here. They won't even come home when we deliver their children. But the worst, is not hearing the language of a partner, someone to speak to you lovingly. Feeling like you've got no partner is a problem. [51]

Thus, feeling utterly alone is another source of trauma that only women reported. When compounded with heightened expectations, fears, responsibilities, and the constant threat of attack, the gendered notions of trauma and reaction to it is made more clear, as is as the difference in responses to trauma. In the words of one interviewee: ***"We learn something from the trauma of others and know our own time will come as well and hope that there will be people to help us through it."*** [52]

Where to Go?


Nearby mountains are a potential source of cover for the woman and the baby she carries as she carries out her out-of-home work.
The woman's home is left unattended, where the only household assets are kept.
The woman's husband is tending the sorghum fields, the household's main source of food.
The women's children are playing away from the home, exposed to the incoming bombing and not close to any cover space.
Overhearing an incoming bomber, a Nuba woman is trapped between responsibilities to protect herself, her children, her home, or her husband and food supply. How does a woman choose where to go and who to protect at an area of imminent bombing?

This uniquely heavy burden women are carrying has led, in some circumstances, to crossing into government-held areas in order to ensure the survival of the household. All 11 of the participants in the group that mentioned this agreed this was happening, and agreed that while young men would be killed at the front if caught trying to cross, women and very young children had a chance of being allowed to pass to government-controlled areas. When asked whether or not the danger was worth it, all agreed with one female respondent who stated "Yes, very bad things can happen to those ones [who opt to cross to Khartoum-controlled areas] but it is good for some and worth the risk."

In summary, what was learned by discussing trauma with men and women in Nuba was the complete difference, outside of bombing, of sources of trauma. Men's described trauma as coming from their front-line experiences, fear of death by bombing, and related often to their own survival, whereas women described an expansive and varied response list of sources of trauma. While this might appear to indicate that men are more concerned with their own personal well-being than women, care must be taken in making this interpretation as cultural notions of the extent to which it is acceptable to express emotional distress play a strong role. What this does indicate, however, is that women have an excessive and varied list of responsibilities which, if not met, can lead to household failure, death, and the break-down of the family unit and this is a source of stress. Men are not, in the current context, equally responsible for every element of household maintenance.

The Women's Associations - Suspended Potentials

The Nuba Mountains Women's Association (NMWA) represents a body which, despite challenges encountered in Nuba Mountains, has significant potential to make progress on promoting gender equality. The NMWA has been in existence for approximately 20 years, and is described by Local to Global as an indigenous civil society institution made up of grassroots women's groups. [53] During the conduct of this research, the researcher encountered branches of the NMWA in all villages visited, indicating that, although it is centered in Kauda, the NMWA possesses considerable reach across the region. As such, it presents a valuable potential resource for women and girls in Nuba Mountains, having the ability to work on the local level to ensure that relevant actors address the unique needs and expertise of women.

However, discussions with the NMWA as well as background discussions with other stakeholders and members of the NMWA located at the village level revealed that the organization also has a strong connection to the SPLM/A-N, including direct links to the governor in Kauda. This connection increases the organization's capacity to implement programming, as this research revealed the lack of a unified "platform" for women to assemble and demand progress on gender equality. The creation of such a platform is currently complicated by both traditional cultural practices in Nuba as well as overwhelming military and political imperatives in the region, which overshadow the need, or the perception of the need, to address gender inequality. Also complicating the effective use of the NMWA for political and social change is the fact that, where engaged, the NMWA are still relegated to care work and other apolitical functions, which limits their ability to address gender inequality directly. Finally, the identity of the NMWA is complicated. On one hand NMWA appears to be a civil society organization, whereas on the other hand, as is the case for many civil society organizations in the Nuba Mountains, the connection to the SPLM/A-N is undeniable. This connection calls into question the ability of NMWA to represent the interests and will of citizens, in the event that the interests of citizens conflict with the interests of the movement.

The designation of a distinct "women's group" within the context of armed rebellions is not something new. Armed rebellions movements in Africa, and South America, all featured separate organs comprised of women and women's groups with distinct ties to the rebel movements. The functions of those organs was similar to those of NMWA, carrying out field first aid, distributing supplies, conducting hospital visits, and addressing the psychosocial needs of civilians and combatants.[54] As is often the case in protracted conflicts connected to a cause for liberation and self-determination, women are expected

to contribute to in a pre-determined fashion, but not necessarily to press hard to address the issues of immediate concern to them. Often this is justified with the argument that, once the core objectives of the movement are completed, issues of gender disparity will be addressed almost by default. This arrangement, at least partially in regards to the NMWA, unnecessarily deprives women of the opportunity to articulate their own political agendas.

This discussion of the NMWA is not meant to downplay the significant contributions the NMWA makes to well-being in Nuba. The list of activities carried out by the NMWA is long and includes:

- Acting in a support function in hospitals;
- Carrying out visits and care to patients being treated at the hospital;
- Leading community sensitization about war-related risks and risk mitigation;
- Educating on digging and protection strategies;
- Visiting families in the community that have lost members;
- Providing psycho-social service provision and solidarity to help communities and families dealing with human and resource loses.

Nonetheless, this research argues that this apolitical work does not represent the optimal use of the NMWA. Researchers noted that members of the NMWA across the region demonstrated strong awareness of gender disparities, dissatisfaction with the status quo, understanding of the patterns of subordination highlighted in this research and commitment to addressing inequality between men and women recorded in the SPLM/A-N controlled areas of the Nuba Mountains.

However, with its focus on care work and functions, as well as deeply imbedded ties to a largely male-dominated SPLM/A-N movement, the NMWA's potential to assume the role of a regional platform in Nuba Mountains for the promotion of gender equality is undermined. This would be a less critical issue in a context with a variety of women's groups in operation, but, as the NMWA represents the only such organ in rebel-controlled South Kordofan, the underutilization of its potential is a serious concern. Because the NMWA has made such indispensable contributions to well-being in Nuba Mountains, perhaps now is the time to begin demanding increased access to political debates, or at least the broadening of their mandate to include more focus on the promotion of gender equality.

Critical Observations

It is important to examine and understand gender relations, social dynamics and power relations during times of conflict, because these extend into post conflict and peacetime setting and would influence social and political stability. Just and egalitarian gender relations within communities reflect society's growth towards democracy and peace. In turn inequality and misogynistic gender relations are more likely to feed into continuous long-term cycles of violence and discrimination.

While carrying out this study it was observed that, in addition to the urgency of amplifying the voices of women from the Nuba Mountains and reflecting on their struggle under exceptionally harsh conditions, it was also crucial to observe the importance of availing space for democratic interactions for the men and women living inside the region. Gender equality and democracy are intertwined since the growth of these values is largely determined by availability of space to exercise and express gender, political and cultural identities. The space to debate concepts and praxes of equality and to negotiate gender relations is critical to women's endeavor for equality and rights. Equality cannot be imposed as a top-down decision, just as little social progress can be made in that way. Without open debate, even positive decisions to treat women equally will be viewed as external and often resented by society, which may perceive them as part of an autocratic regime rather than a natural right. In many instances in this region and beyond, efforts have been made to impose these rights in isolation from democratic space, which has typically ended up with societies experiencing remarkable setbacks.

Civilians in Nuba Mountains, especially women, have become integrated (sometimes willfully, sometimes inadvertently) into the social and economic structures of war and find themselves having to participate by treating and caring for war casualties, burying the dead, and single-handedly caring for families in the absence of husbands and other male relatives. As women are integrated into the war economy, they become proxies to the war, without a reciprocal recognition by the movement of risks and burdens of this support nor any guarantee that such support will be rewarded with increased access to the decision making, something that in the Nuba Mountains has important impacts on women's well-being and that of their families. Connected to this is the fact that the suspension/de-prioritization of civil liberties and human rights is viewed as a temporary necessity, which further closes the space necessary to question and push for action to address gender inequality. Given the kind of support and sympathy which local communities, both women and men, are giving to the SPLM/A-N, it becomes much more likely that gendered violence and gender based exclusions will be considered

normal and, as such, are less likely to be reported. The simple reality is that civilians in the Nuba Mountains are extremely dependent on the SPLM/A-N as the only blockage between themselves and the SAF, and thus are less likely to air grievances openly.

Women in Nuba are experiencing the direct consequences of the development of hyper-masculinity in war. Although both men and women are experiencing trauma and deprivation at shocking levels, men's responses to trauma are directly threatening to women, including increased alcohol use and related sexual violence. The need to protect traditional notions of "manhood" is undeniably related to wide condemnation of contraception, which has further negative impacts on women's health and well-being. When paired with one of the marked male responses to trauma, increased readiness to force sex on partners, the reprehension of birth control is particularly dangerous. Sexual and reproductive health rights remain virtually non-existent in public discourse in the Nuba Mountains, despite the desires of women to limit fertility in the interests of maintaining their health. This would be a natural issue of the mobilization of women's voices.

Despite concerted efforts by various local and international actors, assistance provision largely remains a male-dominated arena and vulnerable to cultural and social gender-biases. The utilization of a male-dominated traditional structure (Sheikhs & Omdas) as a main means of selecting beneficiaries and delivering services, sometimes underpinned by the equally masculine local authorities, runs the risk of insufficiently addressing women's needs at best, and outright excluding them at worst. Although the women did not complain about forms of assistance and or service by local actors, those services remain overwhelmingly dominated by men, which indicate that, at minimum, the influence and ability of women over support and service processes are less than they could be. More broadly, the dominance and influence of traditional male authorities cemented through the leading institutions and mediated by male community members and religious leaders is an indication of a hardening of the patriarchal consensus. This fact has direct implications on Nuba women's ability to claim their rights.

Women lack authority in making livelihood decisions, clearly manifested in the sale of livestock and management of cash, which are key resources in times of scarcity and unmet needs. This renders women more vulnerable, as decisions of livestock and cash use rest almost entirely in men's hands, even when men are further removed from their families and less familiar with their needs. Women remain excluded from influence over high value assets reflecting a deeply embedded bias against women and an understanding in the Nuba Mountains that wealth and status are, quite simply, a man's domain. In such an atmosphere, raising livestock, cultivating or boosting a household's cash assets can be seen as exploitative rather than empowering for women.

It is important to note that women have retained agency in many ways amid significant challenges. From hiding small amounts of cash to the taking of increased space in the assistance realm to the maintenance of the regional NMWA, women in Nuba have displayed high levels of resilience, expertise, and intentions to continue to improve their

situation. Both political and other actors in the area, however, have underutilized women's potential contributions.

Some level of compliance with power structure rules in the region is unavoidable for relevant actors in the region. However, there is space for these agencies to do more to promote gender equality in the Nuba Mountains. The tendency of actors providing support and assistance in the region to accept - and strengthen - male decision making is widespread. This relegates women to the role of humanitarian actors only through the eyes of patriarchy, with their status and needs guided and set by gatekeepers, who only accord legitimacy to their roles as subordinates. The study considers continuation of this pattern of engagement will ultimately hinder women's potential and their genuine input in the developments that influence their own well-being.

According to UN Resolution 1325 on Womens Peace and Security, women should be part and parcel of the peace process. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflict and in peace-building and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security as well as the need to increase their role in decision making with regards to conflict prevention and resolution. For local communities and women in particular, the immediate concerns are with survival, which has led them to fully contribute to the war effort as has been shown through various illustrations. While the necessity of peace building in such a context should inform both political and humanitarian efforts and engagements in the Nuba Mountains, the methods applied need to be carefully integrated into already existing mechanisms through which women are actually able to participate and are exercising some agency.

Finally, it is evident that the brutality and chaos of the warfare in the Nuba Mountains have consumed not only potentials and hopes of the Nuba populations, but it has also created doubts on the future of the Sudanese national state. The failure to maintain sustainable peace within Sudan is largely attributed to the narrow and short sighted approaches of the militarized power holders and elites of the country. However, in the past 20 years, there have been active regional and international engagements in Sudan's agenda, which concluded into the formation of the South Sudanese state in 2011. One can wonder why such engagements deflated into the current level of negligence by both regional and international actors towards the currently stretching and expanding armed conflicts in Sudan.

References

1 IOM Humanitarian Compendium, last updated 12 September 2015, available at http://humanitarian-compendium.iom.int/sudan/2015.

2 Ellick, Adam, "The Worst Atrocity You've Never Heard Of," NY Times, 13 July 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/13/opinion/the-worst-atrocity-youve-never-heard-of.html?_r=2.

3 Nuba Reports, "The Bombing Campaign, Mapped," 23 October 2015, available at http://nubareports.org/the-bombing-campaign-mapped/.

4 See for example, Sudan Consortium and National Human Rights Monitoring Organisation, "Human Rights Violations in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile: 2015 in review, April 2016, available at http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur_consortium_actions/reports/2016/2015ARFINAL.pdf

5 Reeves, Eric, "Fluent, idiomatic rendering of received English summary translation of minutes from July 1, 2014 meeting in Khartoum," 18 February 2015, available at http://sudanreeves.org/2015/02/18/fluent-idiomatic-rendering-of-received-english-summary-translation-of-minutes-from-july-1-2014-meeting-in-khartoum-18-february-2015/.

6 Amnesty International, Don't We Matter: Four Years of Unrelenting Attacks Against Civilians in Sudan's South Kordofan State, July 2015, available at https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr54/2162/2015/en/ and Human Rights Watch, "Sudan: Cluster Bombs Used in Nuba Mountains," April 2015, available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/15/sudan-cluster-bombs-used-nuba-mountains).

7 Nuba Reports, "The Bombing Campaign, Mapped," 23 October 2015, available at http://nubareports.org/the-bombing-campaign-mapped/.

8 Focus group participant, "Risk and Threat Analysis" held in Tongoli Village, Delami County on 19 April 2015.

9 The archived SPLM-N website can be found here, and contains many communiqués and formative documents, available at https://web.archive.org/web/20150419072640/http:/splmnsudan.net/en.

10 Saferworld and Conciliation Resources. "Gender, Violence, and Peace: A Post-2015 Development Agenda (February 2014), p. 3.

11 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, 31 October 2000, https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/720/18/PDF/N0072018.pdf?OpenElement.

12 Focus group participant, "Kauda Women's Centre," held in Kauda, Heiban County on 14 April 2015.

13 Focus group participant, "Head of Household and Household Decision Making" held in Tongol Village, Umdorein Country on 16 April 2015.

14 Focus group participant, "Kauda Women's Centre," held in Kauda, Heiban County on 14 April 2015

15 ibid.

16 Focus group participant, "Past and Present Coping Mechanisms," held in Tongoli Village, Delami County on 19 April 2015.

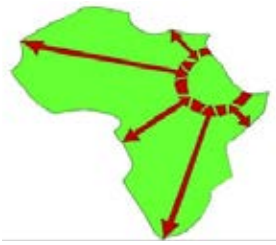
17 Focus group participant, "Head of Household and Household Decision Making," held in Tongol Village, Umdorein County on 16 April 2015.

18 Focus group participant, "Kauda Women's Centre," held in Kauda, Heiban County on 14 April 2015.

19 Council of Europe, Mosaic: Training Kit for Euro-Mediterranean Youth Work, February 2010, p. 166, available at https://books.google.co.ug/books?id=1ZtNwPIN6W0C&pg=PA166&dq=%E2%80%9C%E2%80%A6men+are+soldiers+or+aggressors+and+women+are+wives,+mothers,+nurses,+social+workers+and+sex-workers.%E2%80%9D&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiXr6Xvt_fLAhVE1RQKHeUoBc4Q6AEIGzAA#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9C%E2%80%A6men%20are%20soldiers%20or%20aggressors%20and%20women%20are%20wives%2C%20mothers%2C%20nurses%2C%20social%20workers%20and%20sex-workers.%E2%80%9D&f=false.

20 Focus group participant, "Fuelling the Household," held in Kurchi Village, Umdorein County on 16 April 2015.
21 Ibid.
22 Focus group participant, "Risk and Threat Analysis," held in Tongoli Village, Delami County on 19 April 2015.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Bello, Abdel, "Agriculture Communal Labour in the Nuba Mountains," Journal of Research in Peace, Gender, and Development, June 2014, p. 52, available at http://www.interesjournals.org/full-articles/agriculture-communal-labor-in-the-nuba-mountains.pdf?view=inline.
26 Ibid.
27 Focus group participant, "Risk and Threat Analysis," held in Tongoli Village, Delami County on 19 April 2015.
28 Ibid.
29 Focus group participant, "Past and Present Coping Mechanisms," held in Tongoli Village, Delami County on 19 April 2015.
30 Focus group participant, "Perceptions of Gender Disparities," held in Kurchi Village, Umdorein County on 17 April 2015.
31 Focus group participant, "Women & Access to Seeds," held in Sarat Jamus Village, Umdorein County on 16 April 2015.
32 Focus group participant, "Aid Access and Restrictions," held in Towlou Village, Umdorein County on 17 April 2015.
33 Focus group participant, "Risk and Threat Analysis," held in Tongoli Village, Delami County on 19 April 2015.
34 Focus group participant, "Aid Access & Restrictions," held in Tongoli Village, Delami County on 20 April 2015.
35 Ibid.
36 Portions of informal discussions with the Secretariat in Kauda have been excerpted throughout this section to discuss women and their access and ability to participate in raising livestock. Discussions were held on 12 and 21 April 2015.
37 Sommers, Marc, "Dowry and Division: Youth and State Building in South Sudan," United States Institute of Peace Special Report, November 2011, available at http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR_295.pdf and Ward, Jeanne, "Because Now Men Are Really Sitting On Our Heads," Preliminary Assessment of Gender Based Violence in Nuba Mountains, March 2005, available at http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadt830.pdf.
38 Focus Group Participant. "Head of Household and Household Decision Making." Held in Tongol Village, Um Dorein County on 16 April 2015.
39 Focus group participant, "Risk and Threat Analysis," held in Tongoli Village, Delami County on 19 April 2015.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Focus group participant, "Head of Household and Household Decision Making," held in Tongol Village, Umdorein County on 16 April 2015.
43 Ibid.
44 Focus group participant, "Risk and Threat Analysis," held in Tongoli Village, Delami County on 19 April 2015.
45 El Bushra, Jody, "The State of the Art: Gender Programming in Action," keynote presentation for Seminar on Effective Gender Integration in Disaster and Refugee Assistance: An NGO-Donor Dialogue on Strategies that Work, 1998.
46 Focus Group Participant. "Risk and threat Analysis." Held in Tongoli Village, Delami County on 19 April 2015.

47 ibid.
48 ibid.
49 ibid.
50 ibid.
51 Focus group participant, "Risk and Threat Analysis," held in Tongoli Village, Delami County on 19 April 2015.
52 ibid.
53 Abdalla K. et al, "Women Led Protection During War in South Kordofan," November 2013, available at http://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/South_Kordofan_protection_update_L2GP_2013_final1.pdf.
54 Henshaw, Alexis, "From 'Followers' to Leaders: Re-examining the Roles of Women in Armed Rebellion," 16 August 2013, available at http://www.e-ir.info/2013/08/16/from-followers-to-leaders-re-examining-the-roles-of-women-in-armed-rebellion/.



The Sudan Consortium -African and International Civil Society Action for Sudan