

# Crisis as displacement and opportunity: Reflections on the way South Sudanese women cope with war in refugee camps

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Major crises, such as wars, change the foundations of societies, families, traditions, and morals. This is applicable to the war-torn country of South Sudan, and in particular to the women living there, who, ever since the independence of the country from Sudan in 2011, have been displaced and forced into refugee camps. War creates fear, grief, anxiety, and trauma. At the same time, there is space to create effective positive action that raises an awareness of social discontent in relation to existing or traditional structures. War can sometimes lead to social change, igniting hope, empowerment, and liberation. In South Sudanese Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps, women are increasingly becoming agents for change. They have become community builders and peace makers. The next question is, then, how these changes that women make in the camps can be embedded into existing social and religious structures. Prior to the crisis, political, religious, and tribal male leaders elevated themselves as kings and chiefs. With the present crisis however, there is a need for service-oriented leadership of the kind expressed already by women in the IDP camps. This study advocates for an integration of their voices and experience in the existing leadership cultures of South Sudan.

## Research in the IDP camps of South Sudan: Context and preliminary findings

Over the past decades, women of South Sudan have experienced various types of discrimination at multiple levels: cultural, social, economic, and political. These women, who are mainly from villages, are often mal-treated. Culturally, women do not hold any authority or any respected position in families, communities or in tribes. In addition, they are denied fundamental rights. South Sudanese women are constrained from participating or even interacting with men outside their families. Due to these restraints their effective role in society and their participation is very low. Lack of education, together with some other factors, increase the low participation of women in society. Most women in South Sudan have had no access to formal education (UNES-

CO, 2011, 7). Availability of schools is low and even when present, gender inequality is visible. Culturally, girls are expected to be at home, doing domestic chores and helping their mothers. In the spring of 2021, I returned to the IDP camps of South Sudan where I interviewed sixty women. Many of them express their past lives in the forms of stories and narratives; they share similar feelings and experiences. In one of these interactions, a girl recalled, “I was never allowed to go to the school, although I wanted to study.” Ground level reports reveal that the majority of the females in South Sudan do not know how to read and write (Scott et al., 2014, 774–775). Women in South Sudan remain voiceless and are generally considered to be secondary citizens. Even regarding choosing a life partner, they have little say as the choice is made by the tribe and family. Women, therefore, get “sold” which is the actual meaning of

the dowry. In this male dominated society, women are expected to be submissive to their husbands. They have little contribution, if any, in political and social forums. Therefore, women cannot and do not participate in decision-making activities. Although there are a number of publications discussing the situation of women refugees in Africa, very few of these deal specifically with women in South Sudan, or indeed with IDP women in South Sudan.

## Method

### Selection of camps

I chose three camps out of the many IDP camps in South Sudan, namely, Don Bosco IDP camp, Juba IDP camp, and Wau IDP camp. The criteria for the selection were the following: the selected camp needs to have people from different tribes living together; the population in the camp consists mostly of women; and the camp should have activities or programs empowering women.

### Results and analysis of Empirical research

Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. The recorded interviews were transcribed into written text. From these interviews I collected important themes and key elements of relevance to the research presented here within the framework of Grounded Theory Analysis. Some preliminary data and conclusions, relevant to the arguments made in this paper, include the following: the two dominant reasons given by participants to come to the IDP camps were civil war and tribal clashes, with sexual and physical abuse the third main reason. The latter figure might not have been the dominant reason for women to join the IDP camp, but all of the interviewed women had been victims of sexual or physical assault on their way to the camps or at the time of tribal clashes or civil war, and all the participants affirmed that they have witnessed abuses. Out of the 60 women interviewed, 42 were Christians, 7 were Muslims, 7 followed African Traditional Religion (ATR), and 4 were atheists. Age-wise, nineteen of the women interviewed were between 20–30 years old, eighteen between 31–40, sixteen between 41–50, four between 51–60, with three participants between 61 and 70 years old. The majority of these women had been in the IDP camps for between five

and ten years. They come from a variety of occupational backgrounds, including farming and agriculture, small businesses, self-employment, and casual labour. In general, these women were the main breadwinners for their families.

### The Crisis in South Sudan brings forth threats and opportunities

It is clear that the war between tribes in South Sudan, the youngest country in the world, has disrupted the foundations of society. Families, villages, economy, traditions, and morals have been severely affected (Pavlish and Ho, 2009, 419–421). Crises are part and parcel of human history. Its outcomes are hard to predict, but a crisis is always destructive; yet at the same time a crisis can offer new opportunities. The interviews with women in the camp illustrate the destructive effect of the tribal war, but also the rise of new opportunities.

### The crisis of war as a threat: women and children as victims

Wars destroy communities. The population, especially women and children, are traumatized by the brutality and savagery of violence. People of all ages and gender remain exposed to the catastrophic stress of war and other atrocities. While men fight the war, women and children become an easy target of revenge. Such revenge takes the form of sexual assault, rape, and other form of sexual abuse. Children continue to witness and suffer massacres. Frequently, women and children are forced to leave their homes and find shelter in the IDP or refugee camps. While women become widows, children become orphans. These two vulnerable groups, women and children, become victims of war. They carry heavy burdens of trauma resulting from anxiety, violence, abuse, and torture. In particular, the loss of trust becomes a threat to women's survival. In the interviews, it emerged that younger girls and women were reluctant to report matters of violence and injustices. They were worried about their future. For example, any physical abuse or rape would lessen their chances of marriage (see also Ingiriis and Markus, 2013, 319). Due to crisis and oppressive cultures, the identity of women becomes "thwarted", that is, they become unable "to sustain or properly take up a gendered subject position resulting in a crisis, real or imagined, or self-representation and/or social evaluation" (Vetten, 2000, 65).



## The crisis of war as an opportunity: new roles for women

Despite a crisis' destructiveness, it becomes a reality to live in. Women and children do not have a choice but to move on with life under dire circumstances and they try to make the best of it. As I will show in this article, this contributes to many factors, but primarily to empowerment rather than to self-incapacitation. The prolonged wars in South Sudan continue to change women's roles and disturb social positions. Crises have allowed women in the IDP camps to move forward in life instead of being held back by previous experiences. Suddenly women become heads of families and get responsibilities that are traditionally not theirs. Cecelia (pseudonym), a woman in the Don Bosco camp, says that before the war she was busy with household chores, such as farming, cleaning, and cooking—regular activities at home. She was abused during the war, in front of her children. During the interview, while she was recalling the incident, she depicted that it was a nightmare for her, wishing that she was dead. She wept, then composed herself and spoke again. Over time, she has become the breadwinner, and she considers her children the reason for her survival. Now that her children are at school, she wants to see that they are moving ahead with their lives. She takes on the traditionally male roles of the decision maker and the breadwinner of the family: all the needs of the children are met by her! She wishes to educate her children by all means.

As with Cecelia, before the war women had minimal responsibilities in their families. After the war, that all changed: now these women are forced to be breadwinners, decision makers, and heads of families. In the midst of their suffering, women strongly feel the need to secure the survival of their offspring through the adaptation of additional strategies and coping mechanisms. This goes together with other responsibilities that the women have to shoulder. Because of their stay in the camps, women find a common language to name the crisis and bring increased awareness among themselves about issues that affect them.

The South Sudanese women from the IDP camps have become agents, builders, and makers of peace. These women have created a new powerful identity within the structures of the camp, changing from passivity to activity. One could wonder how this happened. The process has been painful and tension filled. Breaking the traditional cultural barriers and stigmas,

these women have assumed new roles in families and in society bringing forth positive signs of change. Amidst their many new roles, two major ones stand out: women as heads of families—thus, income providers—and as decision makers (Pankhurst, 2003, 161). These new roles pave ways to uplifting women and increasing their participation and ability to act as democracy leaders (Neji, 2017, 1–13). Hence, women have earned their respect and appreciation. As they carry on with their newfound roles, women in the IDP camps give meaning to their existence and lay foundations for a future South Sudan. But how then can this positive change be consolidated?

While change is possible, it is both a difficult and painful process. With the help of women's groups, young girls have been encouraged and helped to pursue education. This is a great step towards gender empowerment and equality. As the women respond to the crisis, new social structures allow them to gain a measure of power and control with mutual respect and dignity. Negotiation of strategies and alternatives illustrate how women cope with their immediate circumstances and constraints. Women's sense of self becomes the motivation for gaining a measure of power and control in their relationships (Boonzaier and De La Rey, 2003, 1024).

Not all South Sudanese women and children were dislocated to South Sudanese IDP camps. The women who escaped to Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Congo, and other parts of the world, have discovered new cultures that respect women and treat them as equals. This has affected women who have settled in the Kakuma refugee camp, and in other Ugandan camps, in a special way. These women have experienced other local cultures and a different status of women. Such women share power, duties, responsibilities, and decision-making side by side with men. In the Kakuma refugee camp and other societies mentioned above, men and women have equal opportunities, and discrimination between women and men is not as rampant (Gitau, 2018, 101–119). The experience of different relations between men and women has opened the eyes of these South Sudanese women to the violation of their rights and the oppression they experienced in their own culture. This new context has encouraged South Sudanese women—and their children—abroad to move ahead with hope. They now seek decision-making forums and the necessary education. They participate in choosing partners, contrary to the women engulfed within the cultures of South Sudan (Gitau, 2018, 101–119).

From the interviews conducted, it becomes clear that South Sudanese women have witnessed the value of the educated woman abroad, both in families and in society. The IDP women inculcated the value of education in their children's lives. This is a new decision, which women are making now as heads of the families, against the ideas of their tribe and against the dominant thinking of tribal men. One can notice that almost all children are regulars in schools; it is because of the persisting effort of their mothers. As one of the participants, by the name of Rose, said, "I am encouraging my daughters and sons to go to school. Even though I am illiterate, over the years of my stay in the camp, with the help of other women I have learned the value of education. I want my daughters to be in a good position, I don't want them to suffer, as I have suffered. So, I have decided to send them to the school." Women are lovers and promoters of education. The educated woman is highly regarded. South Sudanese women who have returned home after living in Kenya and in Uganda have brought these impressions, knowledge, awareness, and changes with them. They are ready to participate in leadership and feel empowered to do so. What kind of leadership could best include them?

### **A leadership that empowers and serves**

Empowering leadership positively affects and unites all by fostering participation (Covington, 2008, 378). This is the style of leadership that is needed in South Sudan as a way towards incorporating women's new roles. In many areas of South Sudan, traditions remain untouched. The rules and regulations continue to favour men. During the conflicts, however, some changes started taking place concerning the roles of women. This became a "liberation" from the old social order. The new situation allows women to be heads of families (Pankhurst, 2003, 159) as they become active in society (Neji, 2017, 1).

A good example can be seen in the Don Bosco IDP camp, where women work in various sectors: agriculture, sewing, tailoring, hairdressing, carpentry, brick making, craft making/African designs and bakery. Through these activities, women are empowered as they become owners of businesses and thus directly receive the proceeds (Kabera and Muyanja, 1994, 101). Empowered women are able to reach out to other women and thus serve. This serving leadership acknowledges and nurtures new roles. This new approach leads to justice and lasting

peace, and gives women opportunities to have increased participation and equality in society (Neji, 2017, 3). Serving leadership brings forth change. It promotes equality, education, and self-respect. This is both a liberation and a revolution. It is an empowering leadership both at the level of the individual and of the group. As Martha Anyang, one of the participants says, "the new opportunities have widened our scope and have created lot self-confidence and self-esteem, and our new experiences are allowing us to move ahead with positivity."

Serving leadership seeks to increase the participation of all, including women. It generates economic expansion and growth. In this way it reduces poverty and leads to a more profitable democracy (Neji, 2017, 3). As Boonzaier and De La Rey (2003, 1013) put it, "Women [have] invoke[d] the past, discuss[ed] the present, and express[ed] concerns and hopes about their futures." Hopes are raised towards real change, based on empowerment and dignity (Brittain, 2003, 41). Serving leadership is indeed empowerment through effective participation. Through these changes, real opportunities for women's development become visible. When leadership seeks and increases the participation of all, inclusion happens.

Inclusion entails working together and solving issues together. Such processes of togetherness create confidence and the rediscovery of the self. It helps in social and economic growth as well as participation in decision-making. This is what women in the camps are doing through groups which play a crucial role in trauma healing, empowerment and conscientization that help women to open new horizons. They free themselves from traditional shackles. They positively manage their families and their society at large. Having looked at the different processes geared towards women empowerment, the next step in my research addresses the role of pastoral care in the empowerment process.

### **Role of pastoral care**

Pastoral care is all about helping people (especially the troubled) to experience healing by sustaining, guiding, and reconciling with one another and with oneself to attain meaning in life (Clebsch and Jaekle, 1967, 4). In a troubled society like South Sudan, reconciliation with oneself and with others is essential. Especially in re-establishing broken relationships between tribes, between women and men, and between God and humanity. This can only be achieved





through forgiveness (Clebsch and Jaekle, 1967, 7). I believe this is one of the greatest challenges of pastoral care in South Sudan.

Every woman has a unique story. Their faith is uniquely revealed through their experiences and responses. Based on the experiences, needs, and stories of women in the camps, we need a model for pastoral care that will respect, empower, and enhance the lives of these women. This model needs to start with the recognition of past suffering. In doing so it creates an atmosphere of gender equality, dignity, respect, and recognition of key roles played by women within families. This approach provides a platform for women to be reconcilers, rebuilders, and heads of communities.

Within this model of pastoral care, change is generated through the collaboration of pastoral care-giver and care-seeker. Change is possible, and it is essential for the growth and good of society. In order to achieve change, a model of pastoral care needs to approach women as whole persons with physical, emotional, social, and spiritual strengths and vulnerabilities, and support them in their healing process. Clinebell and McKeever (2011, 8) already stated that pastoral care is “the use of religious sources for the purpose of empowering people, families, and congregations to heal their brokenness and to grow towards wholeness in their lives”. In the context of pastoral care for women in South Sudanese IDP camps, working with narratives is essential. Listening to stories communicates respect. Women receive the message that they count and that their stories matter. Their presence is acknowledged, their experiences are valued. Each model for pastoral care should build on an encouraging presence of pastoral caregivers that expresses God’s presence and care for those who are suffering and are in need of healing.

A model for pastoral care in the context of South Sudan needs to incorporate support for women moving forward, trying to heal the wounds from the past. This moving ahead is motivated by their children and future aspirations. As an IDP woman, Angelina says, “I have learned that you have to have hope and faith in yourself and God; it is the only way to win the battle. Without it, you can never overcome any kind of obstacle. It is essential to have hope and faith to find true happiness. Believe in yourself. Believe in God. If you do that, you can overcome anything that stands in your way. I have been doing that... Furthermore, because of that, I have found the light at the end of the tunnel. Now, I

must venture into the light to continue my journey with the hope that brings happiness.”

## Conclusion

The research presented here shows how through appropriate pastoral care the majority of IDP women are able to stand on their feet, while using the opportunities that come their way. This article contributes new knowledge from women who have gone beyond race and tribe and are able to work together for a common cause of educating their female children, and to raise their voice for the common good. The process of working together and solving their existential problems helps them to grow in confidence and rediscover themselves. It also helps them socially and economically, and enables them in decision-making activities as a path to healing. Also, IDP women have proven that they are able to bring a change in the mindset of a very conservative and traditional people; these IDP women now provide an example to other women in terms of economic empowerment.

The data also show a new level of meaning and opportunity for the women in the camps linked to their displacement, widowhood, and being in charge of their families: “The culture of oppression is changing, so we choose what type of traditions we want to keep. We want to challenge the inconsistencies, speak our mind”. Times in South Sudan are gradually changing. Young women are adapting new ways and mindsets. In the IDP camps, one of the women said, “we have suffered enough and more, both culturally and traditionally. We don’t want our children to suffer as we have suffered. It is a time for us to move ahead with positivity. Change is taking place. No one defends us. No one fights for us. We must defend ourselves. We must redeem ourselves. We must protect our rights and the rights of our children”. It is clear that the current reality and positions are bringing forth new identities among women in South Sudan.

The data also shows that in these places where women are marginalized, victimized, and oppressed, they exhibit trust, hope, courage, resilience, and perseverance in the midst of their pain and suffering. These women, encountered through the interviews, express deep faith, as they raise and sustain their children and families. They are deeply motivated to give a better future to their children. In the midst of the trauma and loss they have experi-



enced, including the loss of their husbands, the women I interviewed express great love and care for their children. These efforts generate hope aimed at not only removing societal disadvantages but bringing social revolution. This will remove hindrances and barriers of discrimination by providing equal opportunities to all, regardless of gender.

In the absence of their husbands, these women have seized opportunities. They have shifted from supporters to providers through increased awareness and are venturing into new spheres. These newly acquired roles have awakened—or rekindled—a desire for social transformation, instead of resignation to traditional laws of subordination and oppression (Chinkin and Charlesworth, 2006, 937–957). These empowered women seek authentic transformation.

The emphasis of this research is on the stories of women as they acknowledge their pain and suffering, seeking to re-establish and re-arrange their lives. They seek to re-value their lives. As a researcher I am enthralled by the stories of the women participants. Though the women appear to have similar stories, the experiences are diverse. Each story reveals the individual's unique identity, thus enriching the learning and generating information. My experience of working for the women in the IDP camps affirms the need for transformative ideas, and this feeds my determination to build up a model of pastoral care for these women.

The dignity, opportunity and identity denied to these women by the society, calls for change. My research with these women who are residing at the IDP camps confirms that change is possible. Such change needs to be achieved through active listening, acceptance, love, forgiveness, and support. One of the best ways for the Church to support the victims would be through spiritual care. The ongoing ministry in the post-war context of South Sudan continues, therefore, to become an important mission of the Church.

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