

Fighting gender-based violence in South Sudan

by Lona Elia

Decades of under-development and conflict have left South Sudanese women – in the words of the late John Garang – “the poorest of the poor and the marginalised of the marginalised.” It is in this context that violence against women and girls breeds.

Almost all southern Sudan's key development indicators are the lowest in the world.¹ Severe gender disparity is manifest in access to education and health and differential life expectancy. Only 5% of births are attended by skilled health staff and maternal mortality is high. In contrast to common demographic patterns around the world, and in spite of the impact of war on the male population, there are more elderly men than women.

Few reputable gender-based violence (GBV) studies have been carried out in southern Sudan. Studies may have been limited in terms of sample size and statistical analysis but, nevertheless, have produced evidence of extensive domestic violence, early/forced marriages, wife inheritance, property ownership, child custody, arbitrary incarceration, female genital mutilation and sexual harassment and assault. Prolonged conflict³ has exacerbated and created new security risks, especially for women and children. These include disruption of community and family structures, breakdown in conflict resolution mechanisms, presence of arms and vigilantes, prevalent trauma, increased alcohol consumption, weak security institutions, poor law and order and tensions between those who have been displaced and those who have stayed put.

Towards a National Action Plan (NAP)

The Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) – the autonomous regional government established as a result of the January 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) which ended

Sudan's protracted North-South conflict – has recognised the need to tackle GBV. The CPA provides for affirmative action and support to women to become part of the reconstruction process. Sudanese women delegates to the April 2005 Oslo Donors Conference identified GBV as a key priority area and proposed mechanisms to protect women and girls from exposure to violence.⁴ The constitution of southern Sudan affirms the need to equally protect the rights of women and men.

An Interagency GBV Working Group was set up in January 2006. Led by UNFPA, UNDP and UNIFEM, it brings together representatives from other UN agencies (the UN Mission in the Sudan (UNMIS), OCHA, UNHCR and UNICEF), GoSS ministries of Gender, Social Welfare and Religious Affairs and southern Sudanese women's associations. The group has been discussing strategies for developing coherent programming to address GBV issues in South Sudan by exchanging information, minimising duplication and implementing collaborative activities.

As an initial step in the process of developing the NAP, the Working Group scheduled preliminary consultations with key government, military and NGO stakeholders in the southern cities of Wau, Malakal and Juba. Participants repeatedly noted that southern Sudan may have few resources to address GBV but has a committed corps of women's organisations and a committed government.

The process of developing the NAP is in its infancy. Key challenges to be overcome include:

- the lack of GBV-related legislation at GoSS and state levels
- continued preference to settle GBV cases via customary local procedures which rarely promote the best interests of women or girls
- lack of technical support to assist the Interagency Working Group
- lack of targeted funding to support any sustained activities related to GBV in southern Sudan.

Lona James Elia (lona.elia@undp.org) works for UNDP South Sudan's Good Governance and Equity in Political Participation Programme.

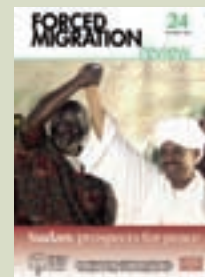
1. With the sole exception of the adult literacy rate which in Niger is even lower.

2. New Sudan Center for Statistics and Evaluation and UNICEF, 2004 'Towards a baseline: best estimates of social indicators for South Sudan', www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/KH11-6365Q7?OpenDocument

3. For the background to Sudan's prolonged North-South conflict and prospects for peace, see FMR 24: www.fmreview.org/sudan.htm

4. www.sudansupport.no/genderconf_05_oslo/doc_index.html

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