



## Women in South Sudan

### - “Predicament, Challenge and Hope”

Women account for over 60% of the population in South Sudan. This is not a force of nature but a direct result of over 39 years of conflict since Sudan’s Independence. Years of conflict has not only deprived women of their dependents - husbands and sons, but the disturbing and conventional post-war society coupled with discriminatory cultural traditions and abject poverty undermines the promotion of equal rights and the ability



(Source: <http://www.binsidetv.net/2011/07/u-s-recognizes-south-sudan-president-barack-obama-releases-statement/>)

for women to actively participate in the development of the new nation. Over 90% of women in South Sudan are illiterate, and 50% of girls under the age of 18 are married which contributes to the high rate of maternal mortality in the country which is still thought to be the highest in the world. While the number of girls enrolled in school has increased over the last few years since the signing of the comprehensive peace agreement in 2005, the percentage of girls at school compared to boys lingers at around 37%. This number severely declines for education past primary school level. Gender based violence is a reality for many women, and abortion is illegal even

when a woman has been raped. The Rule of law is largely inexistent and the majority of cases are dealt with using customary law which inevitably discriminate women and the minorities.

South Sudan even since independence continues to suffer from inter-ethnic conflicts with many women and children being the victims of these clashes. Despite these challenges women have been accorded equal status in the law, and the transitional constitution approved just prior to independence also guarantees equality between the two sexes. Furthermore, according to the transitional Constitution of South Sudan all levels of the government in Southern Sudan shall promote women’s participation in public life and their representation in the legislative and executive organs by at least 25% as an affirmative action to redress imbalances created by history, customs and traditions; Nevertheless in practice this is rarely translated into reality due to As a demonstration of this commitment at present there are 33% of women in the Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly and 28% of women in the State’s Legislative Assembly. However, unfortunately this does not translate down to more local levels of government. For example only 1 out of 10 Governors is female. There is only 1 female county commissioner out of 82 (Western Equatorial) and there are 19 female state ministers out of a possible 127 (constituting approximately nearly 15%). Women are rarely awarded high level positions and even

in institutions whereby they exceed the 25% level, due to poor literacy levels, low education and lack of opportunities, many women still find themselves at the lower end of the job market.

In general the law promotes women's involvement in decision making however low literacy levels and a general lack of opportunities afforded to women. These acts as an important obstacle to women's empowerment and their imminent inclusion in decision making and their promotion as essential leaders for the sustainable development of their country. Furthermore, due to cultural traditions and the perceived low status of women in southern Sudanese society, women are not being enabled enough opportunities to make a difference to the development of their society.

Furthermore, the development of women's organizations and movements is still in their initial stages, and very few women's organizations exist. Nevertheless, the return of many qualified women to southern Sudan due to its independence and the important role that women should play in the political, economic and cultural development cannot be underestimated. Despite the government's commitment to gender equality, women played a very small role in the development of the transitional constitution, and despite the eagerness of many women to exercise their right to vote within the referendum, many women were not aware of their rights, and many women were unable to effectively and actively participate in the referendum. A strategic and sustained approach needs to be developed with the government and civil society organizations to translate the commitment of the government from rhetoric to reality.



Women in South Sudan during the Independence Celebrations. (Source: [www.unocha.org](http://www.unocha.org))

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