

Women's Experiences in the South Sudan Peace Process 2013-2018



UN Photo/Tim McKulka



South Sudanese women's groups and representatives played an important role in ensuring a more inclusive peace process and a strengthened peace deal, signed in September 2018. The peace agreement includes key provisions to end the devastating civil war and build sustainable peace in South Sudan.

However, the focus of the international community and the media has largely been on the major armed groups while insufficient attention has been paid to the roles that women leaders played in the process. This brief captures the key findings from a roundtable discussion in Nairobi, Kenya in December 2018, which gathered South Sudanese women leaders that were directly involved in the long-running peace process from 2013 to 2018 to share experiences and lessons learned. The report presents insights on the strategies used, achievements, challenges faced, and lessons learned relating to women's meaningful participation in the South Sudanese peace process.



Emmily Koiti served as a youth representative in the South Sudan peace talks and was a signatory to the final agreement; herein attending a workshop of national youth dialogue platform in June 2015. *Saila Huusko & CMI*

Introduction

The civil war in South Sudan formally ended on 12 September 2018 with the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS).¹ The road to a signed peace deal had been long and rocky, spanning over five years from 2013 to 2018. Following strong regional and international pressure to end the conflict, the leaders of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) decided to revitalize the stalled 2015 peace agreement by endorsing a new process, the High-Level Revitalization Forum (HLRF), in June 2017. Intensive first negotiations began in December 2017, which resulted in the parties signing a new Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. This in turn, paved the way for the parties to the HLRF signing the full text of the R-ARCSS on the 12 September 2018 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The R-ARCSS is a comprehensive agreement, which covers a vast array of issues including power-sharing arrangements, constitutional reform, security sector reform, economic management and transitional justice.

To date, insufficient attention has been paid to the significant contribution of South Sudanese women's groups and representatives to the peace process as a whole. Not only did they play important roles in ensuring that the process moved forward and that women and other key constituencies were included in the talks, but they also made significant contributions to the content of the peace agreement itself, including gender-specific provisions.

Against this backdrop, South Sudanese women leaders that were directly involved in the peace process – including those who served as observers and negotiators in the formal negotiations – gathered in Nairobi, Kenya in December 2018 to discuss their experiences and lessons learned. The group was diverse with representatives from political parties, academia, civil society, youth, women's networks and coalitions and the parliament.² The roundtable discussion was co-organized by the National Transformational Leadership Institute (NTLI) from the University of Juba, South Sudan, Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) and the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA). Representatives from IGAD and the regional women mediators networks FemWise Africa³ and the Nordic Women Mediators Network⁴ were also present.

The women leaders' joint analysis examined the multi-faceted process that began in December 2013, culminating in the revitalized agreement signed in September 2018. The discussion also provided a valuable opportunity to collectively re-strategize for effective implementation of the peace agreement. Avenues for enhanced future cooperation between national women's networks in South Sudan and regional women mediators' networks were also explored.

This brief captures key findings from the discussions. It identifies lessons drawn from the strategies used by South Sudanese women's organisations and representatives in working for peace, as well as from the concrete achievements and challenges they faced in the process. These insights could help inform and strengthen inclusive implementation of the agreement and provide valuable learning for peace processes in other contexts.

1 For the official R-ARCSS, see <https://igad.int/programs/115-south-sudan-office/1950-signed-revitalized-agreement-on-the-resolution-of-the-conflict-in-south-sudan>

2 There was recognition in the room that not all women who played an instrumental role in bringing peace to South Sudan were represented in the roundtable discussion. This included grassroots women leaders who had been engaged in peace efforts at the local level.

3 FemWise-Africa is a network located within the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) of the AU, aiming to support women's leadership in peace processes in Africa through advocacy, preventive diplomacy and policy formulation (AU PanWise 2017; see <http://bit.ly/2DMUSLM>).

4 The Nordic Women Mediators is a network of women mediators, convened by the Ministries for Foreign Affairs of the five Nordic countries, who aim to support the participation of women in all phases of peace processes (NWM Mission Statement, 2017; see <http://bit.ly/2GjDsVn>).

Key strategies used

Multileveled advocacy for women's inclusion

Numerous women's organisations at national and state levels actively engaged in advocacy efforts to call for women's inclusion in the mediation process. In particular, women called on IGAD to work towards the meaningful inclusion of women and civil society in the peace talks – as observers, negotiators, and members of relevant committees – and in political decision-making at all levels. As a result of this advocacy, for instance, the warring parties were asked to include women in their delegations for the talks in Addis Ababa. For example, the warring parties were given a condition to include women in the list of delegates sent to Addis Ababa for the peace talks. As a result, the number of women at the end of peace talks had dramatically increased compared to the numbers observed in the beginning. By engaging directly with the authorities in charge of the mediation process, including the IGAD Council of Ministers as well as the appointed envoys, the collective mobilisation of women played a key role in ensuring a broader commitment to women's inclusion in the process.

Various women leaders and women's groups also used their existing contacts and built new relationships with the conflict parties to advocate for a seat at the decision-making tables. For example, one delegate persuaded her party chairman to attend a women's meeting during which he announced that he would appoint 30 percent women to key political positions in the transitional government.⁵ At the national level, woman parliamentarians utilized their platform, the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus⁶, to engage in regular information sharing and joint messaging to key decision-makers on the most pertinent policy priorities relevant for the negotiations.

Cross-sectional alliances and joint messages

Throughout the talks, diverse women's groups⁷ worked together to develop and agree on common positions. Women from different ethnic, political and socioeconomic backgrounds formed women's blocs and coalitions to strengthen their collective power. Notably, women peace activists who had already been working together during the peace negotiations with Sudan formed the non-governmental organisation (NGO) the Women's Bloc of South Sudan in 2013. Due to intense lobbying and advocacy, the bloc succeeded in securing a seat as women's representative in the IGAD-led peace process. The bloc was a signatory to the subsequent agreements, including both the ARCSS of August 2015 – which collapsed within less than a year – as well as the R-ARCSS of 2018. In 2017, two large civil society networks were formed, called the South Sudan Civil Society forum (SSCSF) and the South Sudan Women's Coalition (SSWC). The SSWC's representatives ended up serving as official delegates at the talks and signatories of the agreement. Even women parliamentarians, who were not able to participate directly in the negotiations, joined other women's groups in Addis Ababa as an act of solidarity to support their shared agendas.

⁵ This announcement came before the commitment of 35 percent, which is stated in the final peace agreement.

⁶ Women legislators formed the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus in 2007 to enhance women's impact on political decision-making within the national assembly.

⁷ These groups included women from the diaspora, government-controlled as well as opposition-controlled areas, faith-based and grassroots organisations, business groups, refugee camps and orphanages, as well as war widows and women with special needs.

The women's groups and networks also made concerted efforts to learn how to navigate the complex negotiation process to strengthen their influence. For example, they sought technical support to improve their understanding of the draft provisions under discussion and conducted power analyses of the negotiations, which helped them conduct more targeted advocacy. As a result, women's professionalism increased in the course of the negotiation process. For example, the SSWC established a process of agreeing on and issuing a series of 'red lines' as well as 'green lines', and collaborated to promote these positions in formal and informal discussions. This gave increased weight to collective advocacy efforts as it helped make their positions clear.

Pressure and persuasion to advance the negotiations

Women's organisations also played important roles in ensuring that the conflict parties remained in the negotiations. When the process was at a standstill, a group of women leaders – particularly the Women's Bloc and the SSWC – worked to break the deadlock by meeting with key conflict parties and persuading them to continue working for a peaceful solution to the conflict. The women's groups jointly demanded that opposition leader Dr Riek Machar, who was under house arrest in South Africa, should be released in order for him to be able to join the peace talks and meet with President Salva Kiir.⁸ When the president visited the parliament, all women parliamentarians met with him to articulate a strong call for peace.

Community outreach for a more inclusive peace process

Women's organisations contributed to a more inclusive peace process by advancing civic engagement and coordinating their work closely with civil society actors inside and outside South Sudan. A variety of initiatives sprung up at both local and national levels, including consultations, joint interest-formation, collective mobilisation and formation of social media groups, to channel concerns and priorities of women and other civil constituencies into the negotiations. To the extent possible, women delegates strove to ensure that women and civil society actors who were not in Addis Ababa and Khartoum were constantly updated on the progress of the negotiations. Following the signing of the peace deal, several women's groups and organisations have continued to raise awareness and disseminate the peace agreement to citizens to get their buy-in to the process.

⁸ The idea of a face-to-face meeting between the two leaders was initiated by representatives from NTLL. They developed a written concept note, which was shared with IGAD's Special Envoy to South Sudan, and then presented to the IGAD Council of Ministers. They also proposed face-to-face meetings with a number of other key individuals who – although they were at the negotiations table – were not on speaking terms.

Achievements

The concerted efforts by women leaders and organisations throughout the negotiations and peace process have resulted to numerous achievements which have contributed to: (1) the peace process moving forward, (2) increased representation of women in the peace talks, (3) a more inclusive peace process more broadly, (4) significant gender-specific provisions in the peace agreement and (5) strengthened provisions in the peace agreement and face-to-face discussions between the two main leaders President Salva Kiir and Dr Riek Machar. These achievements are discussed in more detail below.

The peace process moved forward

The fact that the peace process moved forward despite numerous deadlocks is a significant achievement, to which women's groups contributed by engaging with the parties and persuading them to remain in the process. Many women's organisations and women leaders used their voice to ensure that the opposition was able to re-join the talks, which was crucial for moving the process forward. Many of the women representatives were able to establish sound working relationships with the conflict parties, which was central for their success.

Greater representation of women in the peace talks

The advocacy efforts to ensure meaningful participation of women in the peace talks were successful in many respects. Not only did the quantitative participation of women increase significantly in the course of the peace process, but their opportunities to influence and contribute to the substantive discussions were also enhanced. During the first part of the peace process in 2014 and 2015, women initially participated as observers to the talks but later became stakeholders and signatories to the first agreement, the ARCSS. The format of the talks was also expanded beyond principal armed factions to multi-party roundtable-negotiations. In 2018 women made up 25 percent of the South Sudanese delegates who signed the revitalized agreement. The visibility of South Sudanese women in the negotiation process was also of symbolic significance. It sent an important message to the public, and particularly to younger generations, about women's role and leadership in decision-making.

A more inclusive peace process

Women representatives also played important roles in strengthening inclusion in the peace process more broadly. They facilitated the active participation of civil society at various levels and from different walks of life, including from refugee camps. Women representatives regularly consulted with their constituencies; raised their constituencies' concerns and priorities in the negotiations and kept them informed on how the process developed. This helped to ensure that communities were better informed about the peace process and the content of the agreement. The roundtable participants highlighted that while there is still much more work to be done to achieve widespread dissemination of the agreement, the efforts have begun and have already yielded some positive initial results.

Gender mainstreaming of the peace agreement

Women's advocacy efforts to ensure gender mainstreaming of the peace agreement gave results. Notably, Chapter 1 of the R-ARCSS stipulates that one of the five Vice Presidents – an interim system set up for the transitional period – must be a woman. It also makes clear that women should hold a minimum of 35 percent of the positions in the executive branch and be included at all levels of decision-making. Further, women have also claimed their rights to official seats in several monitoring bodies and technical committees. This includes the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (JMEC), which is responsible for overall monitoring and overseeing the implementation of the R-ARCSS. Some of these mechanisms did not include any women prior to the signing of the agreement. The R-ARCSS also contains important provisions on the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and reparations.

Strengthened provisions in the peace agreement more broadly

Women's groups also contributed to strengthening the peace agreement more broadly, with improved chapters on power-sharing, on devolution of powers and resources as well as on security arrangements. Some of the women delegates were at the forefront in calling for a more democratic future system of governance.



Members of the South Sudan Women Parliamentary Caucus in a planning meeting in June 2015, preparing for their local-level consultations on peace and reconciliation. *Saila Huusko & CMI*

Challenges faced and lessons learned

Despite the many achievements mentioned above, women's engagement in the peace process faced numerous challenges. These challenges ranged from having to operate in a patriarchal and male-dominated culture at the negotiations to facing regular intimidation and threats, and were perceived to have limited women's opportunities to contribute substantively to the peace process. This section outlines the most significant challenges as well as a number of lessons learned, which are captured in Box 1 at the end of this section.

Patriarchal culture

The negotiations were widely perceived to be characterized by a patriarchal culture that posed significant challenges for women's meaningful engagement in the process. The process was perceived to be male-dominated and characterized by "combatant behaviour", and there were several incidents of verbal abuse and mockery against the women who were vocal in the talks. Some male delegates argued that these women "should have stayed in the kitchen", and that women "lacked the technical and political know-how" to participate in the negotiations. Another frequently used argument suggested that "there are no competent women in South Sudan" to be nominated for relevant decision-making positions. The participants also noted that the host and venue of the negotiations had a bearing on the culture, and as such, moving the talks to Khartoum in June 2018 was seen to have exacerbated such patriarchal tendencies.

The parties largely favoured men when forming their respective delegations to the talks. The IGAD mediation team sought to address this by reserving one-third of all seats to women delegates, which led to more women being included at the table. However, it remained difficult for the women to operate within such male-dominated space. They often found it difficult to speak up and challenge their male colleagues, not least due to the fear of political or social backlash. Often the space available for women to contribute was curtailed explicitly, and women delegates were specifically asked to contribute to 'women's issues' only. This changed drastically over time as women intensified their joint efforts and began to make more substantive contributions to the discussions.

Fast-paced, demanding process with limited technical preparedness

The quickly evolving and demanding negotiation process frequently forced the delegates to adopt reactive rather than proactive approaches. The negotiations became particularly challenging when the talks moved to Khartoum where the environment was perceived to be more militarized and international partners were largely absent. In addition, there were fewer common spaces available for joint meetings, and the women delegates found it increasingly difficult to keep those who were not in Khartoum informed on the developments in the negotiations. Some delegates also experienced difficulties in keeping up with highly technical aspects of the negotiations, in particular, the discussions on security arrangements. The support from

partners was not sufficient. Some groups also misunderstood the role of IGAD's gender advisor; as her support was too often utilized for logistical rather than on technical or substantive matters. It therefore took some time for women representatives to come together to strategize and develop joint messages. However, as the process evolved, women's professionalism and advocacy efforts grew stronger.

Shrinking civic space

Working for peace in a military context of limited civic space posed a number of risks. Many women leaders and activists faced regular threats, harassment and intimidation, and feared for the safety of their loved ones. Several women leaders became refugees in the neighbouring countries as a result, and many of them have not yet returned home. This has hindered the abilities of some leaders to remain actively engaged in the peace process. Similarly, the shrinking civic space has posed a significant challenge for ensuring an inclusive peace process as it has curtailed the space for civil society actors, including women, to discuss openly and share information with citizens. It was noted that at times close relations with international partners raised further suspicion, prompting accusations of "being a mouthpiece for the west".

Financial burden of participation

Participation in the process also posed a significant financial burden. In the absence of dedicated funding mechanisms, women's organisations had to approach various donors to secure funding for organizing meetings, flight tickets and accommodation while in Addis Ababa and Khartoum. While some financial support by donors was provided to the technical teams that supported the civil society delegates and women's groups, it was not sufficient. It was also much more difficult for organisations outside of Juba to secure such support. Due to the financial burden, some delegates had to put their engagement in the peace process on hold in order to work and earn a living to support their families.

Fragmentation among women's groups

While women's groups often managed to bridge ethnic, political and socioeconomic divides to work for peace, there were also some divisions and tensions between them. At times, women leaders prioritized their own ethnic group's or party's agenda and allegiance over unity. The conflict also fuelled mistrust between women politicians, and between different civil society groups, which made it challenging to share relevant information about the negotiations. The fragmentation made it more difficult for women's groups to utilize their collective power and articulate shared positions on particular issues. At the same time, it was recognized that all-encompassing unity might not be a realistic goal in all circumstances.

Insufficient political awareness

While women delegates worked hard to navigate the challenging negotiation process, in hindsight, they wished that they had spent more time on political strategizing and developing a joint vision on how to influence the peace process and utilize this space most effectively. According to them, they should have spent more time with the political parties to better understand their agendas and positions. With that being said, however, at times the women's groups were overly focused on the power-sharing arrangements that largely dominated the negotiations, thereby overlooking other potential avenues to advance gender equality such as gender commissions.

In addition, while the women delegates called on women to be included in the process as a whole, they did not pay enough attention to the drafting team's composition, which held the pen and therefore controlled the narrative in the peace agreement. This was tangibly demonstrated by the last-minute amendments to the final peace agreement text: key provisions that women had advocated for had been removed from the final document. The low number of women in political parties was another challenge. The parties had a lot of influence in the negotiations, but the majority of them were unable or unwilling to send women to represent them at the table.

Limited engagement with women from marginalized groups and refugee camps

While most women representatives made deliberative efforts to connect with and include women from marginalized groups, including those from internally displaced communities, grassroots and refugee camps, it proved to be very difficult: local communities were largely unaware of the developments at the negotiations. The women's groups faced immense challenges in engaging with the most marginalized women, including logistical impediments, a large number of people to reach without sufficient resources, security issues and limited access to refugee camps and the protection sites of the United Nations inside South Sudan.

Lack of sufficient preparedness

An important lesson learned is that women representatives and organisations need to be sufficiently prepared for the work and the challenges ahead. Many women delegates were coming into the process with limited prior knowledge and experience, and faced difficulties in sufficiently preparing for the peace talks in advance due to resource constraints. Articulating joint positions on all relevant issues required convening relevant women actors at the very onset of a negotiation process, as well as sufficient technical and financial support from partners. Such support would have strengthened their technical expertise, including training on negotiations and mediation. Women delegates should also be properly informed about the potential risks of direct engagement, such as threats and intimidation.

Lessons learned from engaging in the peace process

1. Understand the wider political dynamics shaping the process, including the roles of regional players.
2. Appreciate the role of the penholder to the peace agreement – and try to get into the drafting committee.
3. Understand the role of the Gender Advisor and draw on her/his support strategically.
4. Demand that a code of conduct for the peace talks is developed in advance.
5. Convene all women representatives early on, and foster trust throughout the process.
6. Strive for issue-based coalitions but appreciate that consensus is rarely possible.
7. Enhance relationship building with the parties and armed groups, to the extent that is safe and reasonable.
8. Promote women's active participation and influence in political parties.
9. Invest in a capable and effective technical secretariat.
10. Develop monitoring indicators for the implementation of the R-ARCSS and oversight mechanisms for early warning.
11. Obtain mediation training if needed and seek mentoring support.
12. Document and share the information and lessons learned with the next generations.

Priorities for action in the implementation phase

The findings presented in the sections above generated numerous ideas on how women's participation could be continued and deepened during the implementation of the R-ARCSS. There was recognition in the room that while important achievements had been made in the negotiation process, the work to translate the renewed agreement into concrete action had only just begun. The participants identified several priorities for action, which are presented below. They are to be understood as broad priorities that should be advanced by all relevant stakeholders throughout the implementation, not only by the participants of the roundtable.

Ensuring the full implementation of the R-ARCSS

While implementing the gender-specific provisions of the R-ARCSS is vital, it is unlikely to make a difference unless the R-ARCSS is implemented in full. Thus, women's groups and leaders should strategize on how to ensure that the entire peace agreement is implemented. This includes a vast array of issues, such as the reform of the security sector reform. Effective engagement on such topics requires knowledge of the peace agreement as a whole and not only its gender-specific provisions. The importance of monitoring the agreement implementation was also raised. While it was noted that women's groups could play a role in this regard, such role would likely come with significant risks, including security challenges.

Addressing the root causes of conflict

It was recognized that due to the nature of the negotiations process and urgency of stopping the violence, there had not been sufficient reflection and action to address the root causes of the conflict in South Sudan. Women's organisations could play an important role in ensuring that the implementation process addresses these root causes.

Dissemination of the R-ARCSS

Concerted efforts to popularize the agreement to ensure that the South Sudanese population fully understands its content, and what implementation will mean for them, will be crucial. Some work has already been done in this regard: The R-ARCSS is currently available in English and Arabic, and is translated into Juba Arabic.⁹ Furthermore, some national civil society actors are using innovative channels to make the agreement more accessible to communities where literacy rates are low, including drama performances, games and youth clubs. Some mechanisms for shadow monitoring of the implementation of the agreement by young people have also been created.

Despite these efforts, public awareness of the peace agreement and its contents remains low, particularly among displaced communities and women in the grassroots. Continuing and stepping up efforts to disseminate and popularize the peace agreement is therefore deemed an important immediate priority for the implementation phase. A number of ideas for how to accelerate the dissemination were discussed, including linking up with universities, organizing rallies and large meetings, translating the agreement into local languages, and producing press articles about the agreement.

⁹ Juba Arabic is an expanded pidgin spoken in South Sudan.

Trauma healing and reconciliation

Increased efforts to build confidence and advance reconciliation at the community level will be a priority moving forward. An important part of the healing process would be to provide opportunities for women to share their stories and experiences, as well as to be heard.

Upholding all commitments to women's representation

The political space gained, in particular, the provision on 35 percent women in executive positions and at all levels of governance, must be protected throughout the implementation. This requires women's groups to develop a clear political vision for engagement during the implementation phase. Engaging with the governments of Uganda and Sudan – the two guarantors of the peace agreement – is also considered vital. As executive positions are filled by members of political parties, increasing the number of female party members is crucial to attaining the 35 percent objective. Women's groups and networks could provide support for women who decide to run for such positions. Political parties should also take steps to remove obstacles to women's participation, including by addressing gender discrimination and patriarchal power structures within their organisations. Some participants also raised the need for women in South Sudan to create their own political party.

Strengthening coordination of women's collective efforts

Moving forward, women's groups engaged in implementing the R-ARCSS and increasing women's participation therein will need to ensure linkages with other relevant initiatives. Effective coordination among all relevant stakeholders will be key to avoid duplication and will require regular networking, joint agenda-setting and strategizing. There was an agreement in the room that the roundtable discussion served to complement, rather than replace other ongoing efforts. Overall, for the women who are engaged in the implementation of the peace process, it will be particularly important to recognize diversity while striving for issue-based unity built on a shared vision for the future of South Sudan.

Protection of women who engage in peace or politics

Threats and intimidation continue to pose a significant challenge, as does the prevailing insecurity in several parts of the country. Implementation of the agreement, particularly as it pertains to security sector reform, should focus on meeting the security needs of women in general, and those who engage politics in particular. This is crucial as the current security situation makes it difficult to organize meetings, engage women at the grassroots and disseminate the agreement in some parts of the country.

Connecting with women outside South Sudan

The achievements of South Sudanese women leaders and women's organisations deserve global attention, and there was acknowledgement in the room that regional women's mediators' networks could play a role in this regard. As the members in these regional networks are senior women leaders with access to high-level political actors, they could use this leverage to further support the dissemination of key messages. Members of the regional women mediators' networks could also offer mentoring support to younger South Sudanese women leaders. The need to share experiences with women from other contexts who have gone through similar experiences was highlighted as an important way to help South Sudanese women to identify new entry points for addressing challenges and seizing strategic openings in the implementation phase.

Ensuring support of the international community to R-ARCSS implementation

The new agreement was initially met with some caution by international actors. Yet donors' continued commitment and financial support to women's participation, including technical support to women in political parties, is considered to be pivotal. It would also be helpful to further clarify the roles of key regional actors such as the African Union (AU) and IGAD in supporting the agreement implementation. At the same time, it is clear that a demonstration of political will by the parties to the agreement is key to achieving regional and international partners' commitment to supporting the process. At the time of writing, the implementation process has been hampered by non-compliance and violation of rules by the conflict parties. They have also failed to meet deadlines for key milestones, including the appointment of women in various committees.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this brief, South Sudanese women leaders and women's organisations made a substantial contribution to the country's peace process. Yet, women in South Sudan tend to be portrayed as victims rather than actors that played a central role in the peace process. This brief has tried to shed light on the women's strategies, achievements and lessons learned to help shift this narrative. Sharing these experiences can hopefully also serve as valuable support for other women who would like to engage in the peace process moving forward, and to help other countries to learn from South Sudan's experiences.

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