



# AGAINST ALL ODDS

Assessing the Consequences of Shrinking Civic Space on Women Human Rights Defenders

Jointly published November 2023

DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)

**Phone:** +256 200 760 700

**Email:** program@defenddefenders.org | hassans@defenddefenders.org

**Web:** www.defenddefenders.org

**Social media:** Twitter(X) : @DefendDefenders

**Facebook:** @defenddefenders

South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network (SSHRDN)

**Phone:** +211926222596

**Email:** admin@sshrdn.org

**Web:** https://sshrdn.org

**Social media:** Twitter(X): @sshrdNetwork

The publication is available online in PDF format at: [www.defenddefenders.org/reports](http://www.defenddefenders.org/reports) and <https://sshrdn.org>

Report by : Fatuma Hersi, Gisma Juma, Riya Amani, with contributions from Estella Kabachwezi, Nicolas Agostini, Ivan Rugambwa, Memory Bandera, James Bidal, and Hassan Shire.

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With Funding from the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands- South Sudan and the Federal Government of Belgium, represented by the Minister of Development Cooperation.

# QUOTES

“

If you look at South Sudan and some of its human rights violations, you will realize that the violators don't quite see women as human. They see women as women.

- South Sudan WHRD.

”

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“

Most women and girls experience abuse from people they know, so it would be more appropriate for men to confront other men instead of putting women in such situations. In South Sudan, the culture's norms contribute to a male-dominated society. It is a man's world.

- South Sudan WHRD.

”

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“

My lens of seeing myself as a woman is diminished. When I come across intimidation it is because of my work. Whoever wants to intimidate me because I am a woman doesn't faze me. Other women might say I have been hardened by the environment.

- South Sudan WHRD.

”

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“

Sometimes women who report violations are arrested, the victim can become the perpetrator in the eyes of the law.

- South Sudan WHRD.

”

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# ACRONYMS

<b>ACHPR</b>	African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
<b>ARCSS</b>	Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>CPA</b>	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
<b>CRSV</b>	Conflict-related sexual violence
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based violence
<b>HRC</b>	United Nations Human Rights Council
<b>HRD</b>	Human rights defenders
<b>ICCPR</b>	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
<b>ICESCR</b>	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
<b>NAP</b>	National Action Plan
<b>NSS</b>	National Security Service
<b>R-ARCSS</b>	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
<b>SCR</b>	Security Council Resolution
<b>SGBV</b>	Sexual and gender-based violence
<b>SPLM</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
<b>SRHRD</b>	Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders
<b>SSHRDN</b>	South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network
<b>SSPDF</b>	South Sudan People's Defense Force
<b>SSPS</b>	South Sudan Police Service
<b>TCSS</b>	Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan
<b>UDHR</b>	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNSC</b>	United Nations Security Council
<b>WHRD</b>	Women human rights defenders
<b>WPS</b>	Women, Peace, and Security



# ABOUT DEFENDDEFENDERS



Established in 2005, DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project) seeks to strengthen the work of human rights defenders (HRDs) throughout the sub-region by reducing their vulnerability to the risk of persecution and enhancing their capacity to effectively defend human rights. DefendDefenders focuses its work on Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia/Somaliland, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.

DefendDefenders serves as the secretariat of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network, which represents thousands of members consisting of individual HRDs, human rights organisations, and national coalitions that envision a sub-region in which the human rights of every individual as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are respected and upheld.



DefendDefenders also serves as the secretariat of AfricanDefenders (the Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network). AfricanDefenders aims to coordinate activities in the areas of protection, capacity building, and advocacy across the African continent, supporting the five sub-regional networks: the North Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Tunis, Tunisia), the West African Human Rights Defenders Network (Lomé, Togo), the Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Johannesburg, South Africa), the Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Douala, Cameroon), and the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (EHAHRD-Net) (hosted by DefendDefenders in Kampala, Uganda).

AfricanDefenders leads the continental “Ubuntu Hub Cities” initiative, a holistic emergency protection and relocation programme for HRDs at risk across Africa, through its motto: “Safe but not Silent.” Relocation ensures the physical and mental well-being of HRDs, while enabling them to continue their work.



# ABOUT SOUTH SUDAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK

South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network (SSHRDN) is a non-profit, non-political civil society network that is recognised by the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC). It is a coalition of civil society organizations and individuals working to protect and promote of human rights in South Sudan. It is also a member of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network.



The Network was set up in 2012 and officially launched in December 2013 following a meeting of human rights organisations working in the country. It was registered as a non-governmental organisation on 31 May 2019 and relaunched on 6 June 2019 with a functional secretariat based in Juba. It liaises with regional focal secretariats on activities aimed at promoting HRDs' rights. The network has established structures in place to ensure strategic implementation and oversight of programs. It currently has a membership of 60 organisations including from all the seven states in the country.

SSHRDN seeks to provide protection, build the capacity of, and create operational space for HRDs in South Sudan as a means of promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms to safeguard democratic principles through concerted participation of all the populace. It seeks to promote the participation of civil society organisations to research, analyse and pursue strategic interventions through advocacy, campaigns to promote and protect HRDs in South Sudan.

# FOREWORD

**M**ost of what is known of South Sudan's modern history has been the story of first, its liberation from the Arab-dominated North (1983-2011), and later, its stumbling quest for peace since independence, in 2011, to date. The struggle for a free and peaceful country is possible because of the remarkable resilience and sacrifices of countless South Sudanese human rights defenders (HRDs) among whom are the country's women human rights defenders (WHRDs).

From the 1999 Wunlit Peace Conference in which women collaborated with the Church to facilitate reconciliation between Nuer and Dinka factions that were threatening to tear the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) apart, to their starring role in the peace negotiations in 2005, 2015, then later in 2018, WHRDs have been integral stakeholders in South Sudan's quest for a free, independent, and peaceful state.

Yet, despite their agency in efforts to midwife a conflict-free society, they continue to face systematic marginalisation and abuse. Rape, child, early and forced marriage, and sexual gender-based violence (SGBV), in particular conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), have been constant features of South Sudan's cycles of conflict, whether it is inter-communal violence or political conflict at the top echelons of the country's power pyramid. These, in addition to enduring conservative social norms that insist on restricting women's agency to home care work, and the accompanying pervasive social sanctions that seek to penalise those who refuse to conform to such norms continue to make the situation of WHRDs in South Sudan precarious.

This report is a further attempt to unpack the systematic marginalisation and abuse faced by WHRDs as previously documented in DefendDefenders' 2020 report on South Sudan. Consequently, WHRDs are an integral part of DefendDefenders' and SSHRDN's human rights protection and capacity building mandate. Thus regular and thematic-focused research like this one is an indispensable enabler of our advocacy efforts. This report seeks to situate the unique challenges and vulnerabilities of South Sudan's WHRDs in the broader struggle for a freer and more vibrant civic space in South Sudan, while assessing the country's commitment to ensuring a safe working environment for civil society, including WHRDs as provided for in the country's peace accords of 2015, and 2018.

Evaluation is important for every country as we mark 75 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and 25 years of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. HRDs are the frontline agents for ensuring the worldwide success of the UDHR, but their own safety, freedom and wellbeing are not self-assured. Moreover, as resolution 68/181 of the UN General Assembly recognised, WHRDs are doubly vulnerable because of their gender and need our unceasing solidarity and advocacy. Therefore, in line with this year's "The Push for Pledges campaign", I invite you to make a pledge and commit to protect and promote human rights as enshrined in the UDHR.

I invite you to read more of our findings



**Hassan Shire**

Executive Director, DefendDefenders and Chairperson, AfricanDefenders.





# PREFACE

In the annals of history, the struggle for human rights and social justice has often been characterised by the relentless efforts of brave individuals who stand at the forefront of change, challenging oppressive regimes, advocating for marginalised communities, and working tirelessly to protect the fundamental rights of all. Among these unsung heroes, WHRDs occupy a unique and indispensable role.

It is with immense pride and humility that I introduce this profound research endeavor, “Against All Odds: Assessing the Consequences of Shrinking Civic Space on Women Human Rights Defenders.” This comprehensive study delves into the lives, challenges, and triumphs of women who have chosen to confront adversity head-on in their pursuit of justice, equality, and dignity for all in the young nation of South Sudan.

South Sudan’s history is marked by conflict, displacement, and instability. In the face of such adversity, the WHRDs featured in this research have risen above the challenges, showing unwavering commitment to their cause. They have become beacons of hope, working to break the cycle of violence and build a more inclusive and just society.

This research is not just a collection of facts and figures; it is a testament to the incredible resilience, courage, and determination of WHRDs in South Sudan. It brings to light the unique experiences and perspectives of these remarkable individuals, shedding light on the challenges they face as they navigate the complex terrain of human rights advocacy in a country marred by conflict and instability.

Furthermore, this research highlights the critical role that women play in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. It underscores the importance of amplifying their voices, protecting their rights, and ensuring their safety as they work tirelessly to heal their fractured nation and bring about lasting change. As we embark on this journey through the pages of this research, I urge you to read carefully to the stories of these remarkable women. Their experiences, struggles, and victories serve as a powerful reminder that the fight for human rights knows no gender, and that the world is a better place when the voices of women are heard and respected.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the researchers, activists, and all those who contributed to this vital work. Your dedication and commitment to shining a light on the vital role of WHRDs in South Sudan is commendable.

In conclusion, this report is a tribute to the extraordinary women who inspire us all to work towards a world where justice and equality prevail. May their stories ignite the flames of change in our hearts and minds, and may we stand in solidarity with them as they continue their noble struggle.

**James Bidal**

Executive Director, SouthSudan Human Rights Defenders Network

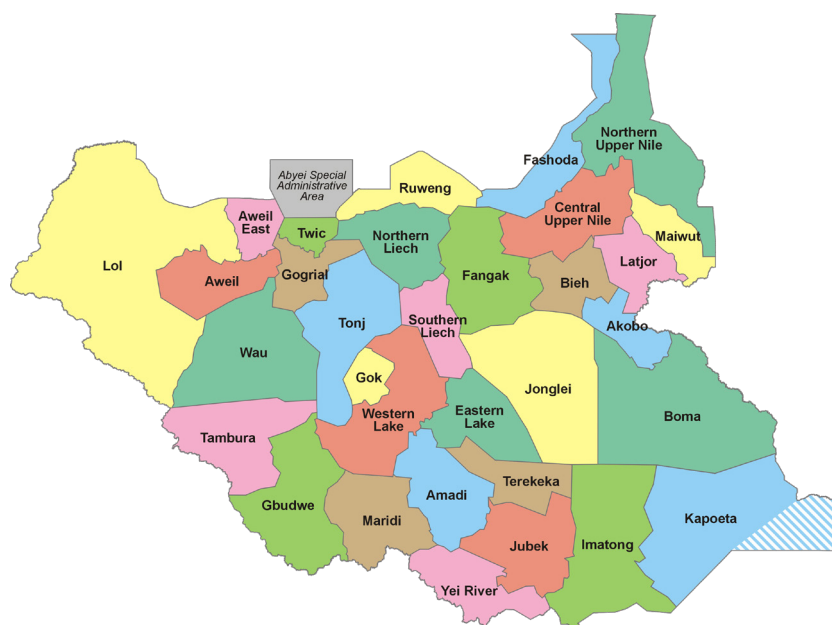


# METHODOLOGY

The current is a culmination of monitoring efforts, desk research, and field research, including interviews, conducted in-person and over the phone with 46 respondents between February and April 2023 in Juba, Aweil, Wau, Bor, Torrit, and Bentiu. All respondents were WHRDs, including journalists, and lawyers. A questionnaire was disseminated to WHRDs that captured a diverse range of information and data including facts and figures, and their perception of the civic space and the operational environment.

Throughout this report, “HRD” will be used more generally to include all defenders. The term “WHRD” will be used to refer to female identifying individuals or those working on issues of women’s rights and gender, irrespective of their own gender identity. In some cases, the term “WHRD” will be used interchangeably with ‘women defenders.’ An HRD is anyone who individually, or in association with others, promotes or strives for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national, regional, or international levels, using peaceful means.<sup>1</sup> WHRDs are defined as women who defend human rights, or an individuals of any gender, who specifically defends the rights of women, or work on gender issues more generally.<sup>2</sup>

This report builds upon years of work in South Sudan, including research, advocacy, protection, and capacity building. Notably, in 2020, DefendDefenders published a report “Targeted But Not Deterred: Human Rights Defenders in South Sudan.”<sup>3</sup> In 2018, another report on the situation of HRDs in the country was published, titled ‘This Is Our Freedom. These Are Our Rights’: Human Rights Defenders in South Sudan since July 2016.<sup>4</sup>



Map of South Sudan

1 OHCHR, “United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, “Who is a Defender?,” <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/SRHRDefenders/Pages/Defender.aspx#ftn1>, accessed on 8 May 2023.

2 Global Fund for Women, “Who are women human rights defenders?,” <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/what-are-women-human-rights-defenders/>, accessed on 8 May 2023.

3 DefendDefenders, “Targeted But Not Deterred: Human Rights Defenders Fighting for Justice and Peace in South Sudan” 2020, <https://defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/South-Sudan-report.pdf>, Accessed 08 July 2023.

4 DefendDefenders, “This Is Our Freedom. These Are Our Rights’: Human rights defenders in South Sudan since July 2016,” 26 April 2018, <https://defenddefenders.org/this-is-our-freedom-these-are-our-rights-human-rights-defenders-in-south-sudan-since-july-2016/>, Accessed 08 July 2023.

## Limitations

While attempting to be as comprehensive as possible, this report has several limitations that must be clarified for its conclusions and recommendations to be understood in context. The findings seek to identify broader trends in South Sudan but are by no means exhaustive. The choice of physical research locations was based on the presence of WHRDs in urban centers, weighed against budgetary and logistical limitations, as well as security assessments. The research team was unable to cover all areas in South Sudan due to increased insecurity and active conflicts.

The findings and needs assessments presented in this report should be considered as baselines for other organisations looking to conduct more in-depth research about WHRDs in South Sudan. Claims not otherwise sourced are credited to the interviews conducted by DefendDefenders and SSHRDN, making every effort to verify information with multiple independent sources.

The names and personally identifiable data of all sources have been omitted to ensure their safety and protection. All interviewees were informed about the objectives of the research and format of this report and expressed informed consent to DefendDefenders and SSHRDN, regarding the use of the information they provided. WHRDs did not receive any form of financial compensation for their testimonies. We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to all the individuals who shared their testimonies, insights, and analysis.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Sudanese women have been pivotal in the pursuit of peace and human rights, from the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005 to subsequent peace agreements which ultimately led to the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Despite their resilience and significant contributions, WHRDs in South Sudan face a hostile environment shaped by deeply entrenched patriarchal values. In addition to gender-based challenges, WHRDs much like other HRDs, encounter intimidation, threats, stigmatisation, legal restrictions, physical attacks, and criminalisation due to their human rights work. These challenges are further exacerbated in rural areas where traditional gender norms hold stronger sway.

WHRDs are particularly susceptible to various forms of gender-specific threats and violence in both public and private spheres. This includes gendered verbal abuse, sexual harassment, rape, and SGBV. Regrettably, such acts can lead to additional marginalisation and exclusion, including through social stigma. Even individuals who support or are closely connected to WHRDs, including family members, are not immune from being specifically targeted.

Moreover, WHRDs often find themselves at the center of attacks aimed at tarnishing their reputation and challenging their sexuality. These assaults often stem from non-conformity with stereotypes governing “appropriate” behavior for women and men. Conservative narratives that confine women to family and procreation roles contribute to this targeting. Consequently, WHRDs are frequently targets of hostility when participating in collective public actions or movements, both online and offline, sometimes resulting in their isolation and estrangement from their communities and families. Security authorities in South Sudan often display hostile attitudes toward WHRDs. Victims of violations often face blame for “bringing harm upon themselves” when reporting offenses, especially in Wau, Aweil, and Bentiu.

Restrictions on women’s attire and bodily autonomy are common in South Sudan. In some regions, like Bentiu, authorities dictate women’s clothing choices, leading to violent consequences for non-compliance. Furthermore, WHRDs may face accusations of promoting foreign values. These threats, risks, and violations are further exacerbated in contexts marked by conflict, disaster, economic and political instability.

Law enforcement presents a substantial obstacle to the protection of WHRDs. Peaceful demonstrations are less and less tolerated, and many WHRDs live in fear due to repeated threats and harassment by state operatives.

The report’s findings also reveal the limited knowledge of legal frameworks, ineffective advocacy strategies, insufficient funding, poor organisation, and restricted access to legal recourse. These challenges hinder WHRDs’ ability to effectively promote human rights and social justice in South Sudan. Their limited understanding of legal frameworks makes them more vulnerable to potential legal consequences. Inadequate advocacy strategies suggest that WHRDs may struggle to communicate their objectives effectively and garner support for their causes. The issue of insufficient funding not only restricts their operational capacity but also reflects broader resource disparities in the activist landscape. Poor organisation particularly in rural areas, implies a lack of infrastructure and coordination, significantly affecting their collective impact. Finally, limited access to legal recourse means that WHRDs may encounter

difficulties seeking justice and protection when their rights are violated.

While challenges persist, South Sudanese WHRDs demonstrate remarkable resilience by forming self-sustainable unions, associations, and networks in the different States. These community-based initiatives offer crucial support for WHRDs in the face of adversity.

In summary, this report provides a comprehensive account of the situation of WHRDs in South Sudan. It outlines their experiences, challenges, and needs, while also presenting key recommendations to address the unique obstacles they face in their pursuit of human rights.



**“When we report on violations, we often face questions about our presence in public spaces. In many instances, the conversation shifts to focus on our roles as mothers and wives or why we might be perceived as dressed indecently.”**  
**-South Sudanese WHRD.**

# BACKGROUND

The conflict in South Sudan is complex and multi-faceted, involving significant humanitarian and human rights concerns, as well as ongoing political and security challenges. The current post-independence conflict dates back to December 2013 following a political power struggle within the ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), an armed confrontation between soldiers loyal to President Salva Kiir and then-Vice President Riek Machar. The conflict quickly escalated and rapidly spread to other areas of the country, including Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity states. Both warring factions were accused of committing brutal violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, against civilians, including targeted killings, rape, and forced displacement.<sup>5</sup>

Efforts to broker a peace agreement were initially unsuccessful until August 2015 when a power-sharing deal was signed between Kiir and Machar. This agreement reinstated Machar as Vice President and established a transitional government to lead the country until elections could be held. However, the peace deal quickly collapsed, with both sides accusing each other of violating the agreement, leading to resumption of fighting in 2016.<sup>6</sup> Multiple ceasefires were violated before 2018,<sup>7</sup> which ultimately led to the R-ARCSS.

In September 2018, the R-ARCSS was signed, aiming to form a new transitional government of national unity. However, the country continues to face governance, security, humanitarian, and human rights challenges. The establishment of transitional justice mechanisms, including a Hybrid Court for South Sudan, is repeatedly delayed and obstructed by the government, hindering accountability for serious crimes committed during the conflict.

The human rights situation in South Sudan remains concerning, with ongoing violations and abuses, including extrajudicial executions,<sup>8</sup> unlawful killings, recruitment, and use of child soldiers, SGBV, and attacks on civil society and civic space. HRDs, journalists, and other independent actors face restrictions, harassment, intimidation, surveillance, and arbitrary arrests and detentions. Impunity for violations and abuses remains widespread, contributing to a climate of fear and insecurity.

Monitoring organisations continue to express deep concern over the lack of structural improvements and the pervasive intercommunal violence and conflicts across various regions in South Sudan. The government's repression of peaceful protests,<sup>9</sup> harassment of civil society actors,<sup>10</sup> and restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and association exacerbate the human rights challenges faced by the citizens.

CSOs in South Sudan have achieved some progress at both the grassroots and national levels.

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5 See DefendDefenders, For us, silence is not an option" Human Rights Defenders and the South Sudan Civil War, December 2014, <https://defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/South-Sudan-2014-Report.pdf>, Accessed 8 July 2023.

6 See DefendDefenders, "Targeted But Not Deterred: Human Rights Defenders Fighting for Justice and Peace in South Sudan" 2020, <https://defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/South-Sudan-report.pdf>, Accessed 08 July 2023.

7 The Economist, "Ceasefires in South Sudan seldom last," 10 July 2018, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/07/10/ceasefires-in-south-sudan-seldom-last>, Accessed on 8 May 2023.

8 Human Rights Watch, "Extrajudicial Killings Emblematic of Impunity by Army," 1 June 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/01/execution-style-killings-emblematic-impunity-south-sudan-army>, Accessed on 8 May 2023.

9 Amnesty International, "South Sudan: End new wave of repression against peaceful protesters," 3 September 2021, [www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/south-sudan-end-new-wave-of-repression-against-peaceful-protests/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/south-sudan-end-new-wave-of-repression-against-peaceful-protests/), Accessed on 8 May 2023.

10 Amnesty International et al., "South Sudan: Unfreeze civil society and political activist's bank accounts," 19 November 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr65/5017/2021/en/>, Accessed on 8 May 2023.

These organisations have worked towards ensuring women’s access to essential services and have played a crucial role in promoting local peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts.

Within this landscape, WHRDs in South Sudan have championed gender equality and peacebuilding. Their activism is closely intertwined with the country’s conflicts and peace processes. Amid persistent turmoil and the added pressure of the climate crisis, the United Nations reported a distressing surge in gender-based violence (GBV) in South Sudan,<sup>11</sup> with women and girls often bearing the brunt of this brutality.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, it is crucial to conduct research to better understand and address the roles, risks, and vulnerabilities faced by WHRDs in South Sudan. By documenting the ongoing violations and abuses and identifying the challenges they face, the research aims to contribute to strengthening protection mechanisms and promoting accountability for human rights violations in the country.



**“We have good laws that protect women and children but we need to put them in practice”.  
-South Sudanese WHRD.**

11 UN, “‘hellish existence’ for women and girls, new UN report reveals, 21 March 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114312>, Accessed on 8 May 2023.

12 Relief web, “At Security Council Debate, Delegates Call for Women’s Inclusion in All Peace Processes, Protection of Human Rights Defenders,” 20 October 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/security-council-debate-delegates-call-womens-inclusion-all-peace-processes-protection-human-rights-defenders>, Accessed on 8 May 2023.

# INTRODUCTION

The voices of women are essential to create and maintain a vibrant civil society, in conflict mitigation, and in peace-building processes. South Sudanese women, including WHRDs, have been active participants and leaders in efforts to achieve peace throughout the country's history of conflict. They have proven to be instrumental in increasing women's representation in peace processes and at various levels of government. Nonetheless, challenges persist in translating increased representation among political elites into tangible advancements for women's causes.

Research suggests that peace agreements with a higher number of female signatories have a greater likelihood of holding, highlighting the positive impact of women's involvement in peace processes.<sup>13</sup> Over the past two decades, the representation of women in national peace processes has steadily grown. The number of female signatories to peace agreements has increased, indicating progress in women's participation.

An early example of grassroots mobilisation by women is the Wunlit peace process in 1999. Women played a key role in this process by participating in delegations, fostering dialogue between communities, and addressing issues affecting women and children. Their inclusion as signatories to the final agreement ensured the representation of women's perspectives and concerns.

While women's representation during the CPA talks was initially limited, women representatives collaborated with women's organisations and networks to coordinate their actions. Women activists played a crucial role in organising targeted protests and campaigns to draw international attention to the conflict. The inclusion of a 25% affirmative action quota for women's representation in government within the CPA set an important precedent for future generations of women activists.<sup>14</sup>

Women's CSOs such as the South Sudanese Women's Empowerment Network and the South Sudan Women General Association, also played significant roles during the CPA negotiations.<sup>15</sup> These organisations contributed to peacebuilding efforts by translating agreements, bridging rival factions, and advocating for women's rights.

South Sudanese WHRDs continue to make notable strides in the pursuit of gender equality and justice. Women actively campaigned for and successfully increased the women's representation quota from 25% to 35% during the R-ARCSS in 2018.<sup>16</sup> Beyond formal institutions, WHRDs, including women peacebuilders, journalists, and civil society leaders, have consistently amplified their voices. One powerful instance of this was witnessed in the recent campaign by young women. Their campaign, #WhereIsTheAntiGBVbill, shed light on a crucial piece of legislation aimed at supporting justice for survivors of gender based violence.<sup>17</sup>

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13 Council on Foreign Relations, "Women's Participation in Peace Processes," 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/#:~:text=In%20fact%2C%20women's%20participation%20in,fifteen%20years%20by%2035%20percent>. Accessed on 2 July 2023.

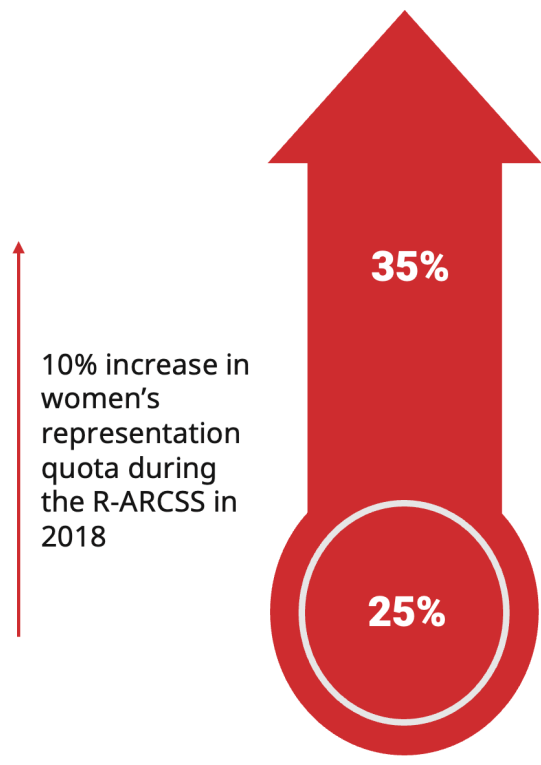
14 Tindall, T, "Women's participation and influence in transitions from conflict," 2022, [http://cdn-odi-production.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/media/documents/WPS\\_South\\_Sudan\\_Case\\_Study\\_FINAL\\_FCDO\\_v2\\_3eWbhFR.pdf](http://cdn-odi-production.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/media/documents/WPS_South_Sudan_Case_Study_FINAL_FCDO_v2_3eWbhFR.pdf), Accessed on 2 July 2023.

15 Ibid.

16 RWPSA, "Report on leadership training Institute for on Womane, Peace and Security in South Sudan," November 2020, <https://wipc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Rejuvenating-the-Women-Peace-and-Security-Agenda-Towards-Participation-and-Implementation-of-the-UN-SCR-1325-NAP-South-Sudan.pdf>, Accessed on 2 July 2023.

17 Gender Talk, "Where is the anti GBV bill." <https://gendertalk211.org/?s=%23WhereIsTheAntiGBVbill%2C+>, Accessed on 2 July 2023.





Despite this progress, women in South Sudan continue to be underrepresented across public life. Women's grassroots organisations face challenges due to chronic lack of resources and opposition from certain chiefs, religious leaders, and the community who resist women's engagement in public roles.

This report aims to shed light on the experiences, roles, risks, and vulnerabilities faced by South Sudanese WHRDs in their pursuit of peace and social justice. The next sections in the report analyses the legal frameworks; the challenges and needs; and make concrete recommendations to protect and promote the rights of WHRDs.

# LEGAL FRAMEWORK

## National Legal Framework

The Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan (TCSS, 2011) serves as a cornerstone, enshrining the right to freedom of expression in Article 24(1). This article guarantees every citizen the freedom to express, receive, and disseminate information, including access to the press, with due consideration for public order, safety, and morals as prescribed by law. Article 25(1) recognises and guarantees the right to peaceful assembly, allowing individuals to freely associate with others, form or join political parties, associations, and trade or professional unions for the protection of their interests.

Article 16 of the Constitution guarantees women shall be accorded full and equal dignity of the person with men. This includes the right to equal pay for equal work and participation on equal terms with men in public life. Women also have the right to own property and inherit from their deceased husbands alongside any surviving legal heirs. Moreover, Article 16 mandates the enactment of laws to combat harmful customs and traditions that undermine the dignity and status of women.

South Sudan's Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) and National Action Plan (NAP) provide a roadmap to protect WHRDs from SGBV and increase their participation in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and state-building processes.<sup>18</sup>

However, the effective implementation of the WPS and NAP requires the allocation of sufficient resources, capacity-building initiatives, and robust monitoring and

reporting mechanisms.

## Regional Legal Framework

Regionally, both the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) play a crucial role in bolstering the legal protection of women, including WHRDs. Notably, the ACHPR has taken significant steps in support of HRDs by adopting four resolutions. Among these resolutions, two are dedicated to defining the mandate and role of a Special Rapporteur for human rights defenders in Africa,<sup>19</sup> while the remaining two focus on protecting and recognising the rights of HRDs.<sup>20</sup>

The African Charter recognises the rights of WHRDs indirectly through provisions that protect human rights defenders in general. Additionally, the Maputo Protocol, ratified by South Sudan on 7 July 2023, guarantees extensive rights to African women and girls, including protections against harmful traditional practices, reproductive health and rights, participation in political processes, economic empowerment, and ending violence against women.<sup>21</sup>

## International Legal Framework

The international legal framework provides additional protection for and recognition of WHRDs in South Sudan. International instruments such as the UDHR,<sup>22</sup> the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),<sup>23</sup> the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR),

18 Peace Women, "South Sudan", <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/south-sudan/>, Accessed on 2 July 2023.

19 ACHPR, Resolution on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders In Africa, 2004 <https://achpr.au.int/en/mechanisms/special-rapporteur-human-rights-defenders-and-focal-point-reprisals-africa>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

20 ACHPR, "119 Resolution on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Africa, 5 November 2023, <https://achpr.au.int/index.php/en/adopted-resolutions/196-resolution-human-rights-defenders-africa-achprres19612011>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

21 African Union, "South Sudan becomes the 44th country to ratify the Protocol on Women's Rights, 7 June 2023, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20230607/south-sudan-becomes-44th-country-ratify-protocol-womens-rights>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

22 Refworld, "United Nations General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights," 10 December 1948, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3712c.html>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

23 United Nations General Assembly, "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights", 16 December 1966, <https://www.refworld.org/>

<sup>24</sup> and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)<sup>25</sup> offer avenues for promoting and defending the rights of WHRDs.

The UDHR (despite its non-binding character) and the ICCPR (to which South Sudan is a state party) guarantee key rights for all WHRDs, including freedom of association, peaceful assembly, opinion, and expression. While these documents do not explicitly address the gender dimension of rights, they can be invoked to advocate for the protection and recognition of WHRDs. Moreover, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders demonstrate the international community's commitment to safeguarding the rights of WHRDs.

The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) established a thematic mandate of a Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, an independent expert appointed by the HRC to investigate and report on issues related to violence against women and its various causes and consequences worldwide. Additionally, the HRC established a Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice.<sup>26</sup> The Working Group focuses on investigating and addressing various forms of discrimination faced by women and girls globally and formulates recommendations to promote gender equality and eliminate discrimination.

Furthermore, Resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council (UNSC) stands as a significant milestone concerning women, peace, and security.<sup>27</sup> This resolution, as well as further resolutions on women, peace and security, emphasises the importance of involving women in all aspects of UN peace and security initiatives and encourages the integration of gender perspectives. Notably, it holds the distinction of being the first UNSC resolution to call on all conflicting parties to implement

specific measures to safeguard women and girls from GBV, especially during armed conflicts. Such measures seek to address issues like rape and other forms of sexual violence that women and girls often face during these challenging situations.

Despite these legal provisions, South Sudan has consistently ranked among the world's lowest in terms of gender equality,<sup>28</sup> and harmful gender norms have a long-standing presence in the country. Ratification of conventions alone will not suffice; the government must undertake extensive legal and policy reforms to integrate these treaties effectively into domestic law and bring about meaningful change throughout the nation. Holding all perpetrators accountable for their actions, regardless of rank or social status, is essential for achieving lasting progress.

*"If you look at the legal framework right from the constitution, it gives significant rights to women. Nationally we have instruments but how much of it do we understand. Knowing your rights and not knowing its legal anchor is as good as not knowing your right". -South Sudanese WHRD.*

*"We have good laws that protect women and children but we need to put them in practice". -South Sudanese WHRD.*

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docid/3ae6b3aa0.html, accessed on 2 July 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Organisation of African Unity, "African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights", 27 June 1981, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3630.html>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

<sup>25</sup> UN General Assembly, "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women", 18 December 1979, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3970.html>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

<sup>26</sup> <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G10/167/91/PDF/G1016791.pdf?>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

<sup>27</sup> UNSC. "Resolution 1325 (2000) Adopted by the Security Council at its 4213th meeting", 31 October 2000, [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SC\\_ResolutionWomenPeaceSecurity\\_SRES1325%282000%29%28english\\_0.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SC_ResolutionWomenPeaceSecurity_SRES1325%282000%29%28english_0.pdf), accessed on 2 July 2023.

<sup>28</sup> UN Women, "South Sudan", <https://data.unwomen.org/country/south-sudan>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

# CHALLENGES FACED BY WHRDS

This report identified that vulnerabilities and adversities encountered by WHRDs are deeply influenced by the prevailing socio-cultural, economic, and political context. These determinants often dictate the nature and extent of the obstacles WHRDs confront in their quest for protecting and promoting human rights. In their pursuit, WHRDs are vulnerable to violations and abuses while breaking barriers and dismantling oppressive structures.

## Political, legal, and insecurity challenges

Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan continues to face ongoing political instability, armed conflicts, and humanitarian crises. The complex political environment significantly affects the work and safety of all HRDs including WHRDs in the country.

The ongoing localised conflicts in Upper Nile, parts of Bahr-El Gazal, and Equatoria resulted in widespread displacement, disproportionately affecting women.<sup>29</sup> WHRDs working with displaced communities face additional challenges in providing support and protection for vulnerable women as limited access to resources, including healthcare and education, further exacerbates the situation.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, the conflict and political instability led to an increase in GBV against women. According to a 2022 report on conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls in South Sudan, “women’s bodies have been systematically used to achieve military or political objectives and are considered as the spoils of war.”<sup>31</sup> The report noted that there is no official State body in South Sudan that collates disaggregated data on the number of

women and children who have been victims of sexual violence in the context of the conflict. Women interviewed for this report through their work to an extent try to fill this gap.

This insecurity poses significant risks to WHRDs who often face targeted attacks due to their activism. Additionally, SGBV remains an ever present threat that WHRDs face.<sup>32</sup> The threat of violence and intimidation can deter women from participating in human rights work. Rural WHRDs, in particular, encounter additional barriers due to their isolation, limited access to communication, infrastructure, and resources.<sup>33</sup> Their vital work becomes even more challenging and riskier in these remote settings.

*“We lack freedom of expression and movement. Planning any activity or program requires clearance from NSS officers, and sometimes they approve, with the condition of an NSS officer attending the program.”- South Sudanese WHRD.*

*“Insecurity poses challenges for women defenders in rural and remote areas,” remarks a South Sudanese WHRD. “Working with women in conflict zones, we encounter difficulties accessing other remote regions, which evokes fear while trying to protect them. The lack of safe houses in some states and the logistical hurdles of relocating them across the country raises concerns about how to safeguard these women.” -South Sudanese WHRD.*

## Shrinking civic space

The political climate in South Sudan is characterised by restrictions on civic space is. When governments or authorities restrict the

29 Un Women, “South Sudan, <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/eastern-and-southern-africa/south-sudan>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

30 OHCHR, “Women’s human rights and gender-related concerns in situations of conflict and instability”, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/womens-human-rights-and-gender-related-concerns-situations-conflict-and-instability>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

31 ACHPR, “Conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls in South Sudan,” 21 March 2022 [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/A\\_HRC\\_49\\_CRP\\_4.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/A_HRC_49_CRP_4.pdf), accessed on 2 July 2023.

32 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/198/48/PDF/N2319848.pdf?OpenElement>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

33 “Interview South Sudan”, 2023.

space for CSOs, it becomes challenging for all HRDs, including WHRDs, to operate freely and advocate for women's rights. Restrictions on freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association can lead to increased harassment, surveillance, and persecution of WHRDs, limiting their ability to carry out their work. Furthermore, restrictive laws or regulations can be used to silence activists and hinder their efforts in advocating for gender equality and women's rights.

According to an Amnesty International report released in 2021,<sup>34</sup> the government, primarily through the National Security Services (NSS), uses intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention, torture, and other ill-treatment, enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings to silence government critics, human rights activists and journalists.

Moreover, the requirement of NSS approval to hold public events stifles dialogue right from its inception. DefendDefenders highlighted that this practice intensified after the outbreak of violence in 2016,<sup>35</sup> as a means to control discussions about the resulting violations. Under this arbitrary rule, the NSS monitors all HRD forums, spaces, and trainings and has even arrested HRDs for attending such events. Consequently, the NSS now exercises authority not only over HRD space in South Sudan but also harasses HRDs who participate in international trainings.

*"We lack freedom of expression and movement. Planning any activity or program requires clearance from NSS officers, and sometimes they approve, with the condition of an NSS officer attending the program." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

*"We attempted to organise a protest advocating for the end of GBV, early marriage, and the promotion of girls' education in Wau. During our efforts, the NSS came to our office, detained, and held the president of the women's association*

*for three hours while conducting an investigation." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

The NSS strategically deploys agents across South Sudan and neighboring countries, infiltrating various sectors of society and everyday activities. Multiple reports confirm that intelligence agents have successfully infiltrated NGOs, the media, private sector security companies, and hotels.<sup>36</sup> This extensive spy network of the NSS creates an environment that encroaches upon freedom of opinion, expression, and privacy.

*"Self-censorship happens among WHRDs because of fear." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

*"The human rights space is being infiltrated. You cannot trust your colleagues." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

*"As an activist, I find it very lonely. In the past, you could trust your colleagues and be friends, but currently, the space is being infiltrated, and I cannot count on anybody." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

Most women activists interviewed for this report expressed concern over surveillance, harassment and looming risk of arbitrary arrest, detention, and possible death. They mentioned that such risks can deter them from conducting their work. In response to how WHRDs mitigate risks, a few HRDs mentioned the need to be diligent. Some women noted that they avoid talking about sensitive topics over the phone, instead they prefer to talk in person or through encrypted applications.

One WHRD, mentioned that she found someone impersonating as an IT technician leaving their offices. When she inquired and she was told the details, she suspected that NSS officers or other government authorities tapped their phones, the GBV helpline, and their offices.

Another women's organisation dedicated to help victims of SGBV has been a victim of

34 Amnesty International, "Rampant abusive surveillance by NSS instills climate of fear," 2 February 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/02/south-sudan-abusive-surveillance-by-national-security-service-climate-of-fear/>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

35 "Targeted But Not Deterred: Human Rights Defenders Fighting for Justice and Peace in South Sudan" 2020, <https://defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/South-Sudan-report.pdf>, Accessed 08 July 2023.

36 Amnesty International, "Rampant abusive surveillance by NSS instills climate of fear," 2 February 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/02/south-sudan-abusive-surveillance-by-national-security-service-climate-of-fear/>, accessed on 2 July 2023.

multiple raids by the NSS. Their executive director has been arrested multiple times and this is a consequence of the sweeping, and unchecked powers including the right to arrest without a warrant.

Despite the recent progress made by the government announcing that the NSS should refrain from arresting people without warrants, not much has changed in practice.<sup>37</sup> Many WHRDs interviewed noted that due to the impunity they do not have faith with this Presidential directive.

### **Women's underrepresentation in decision-making and the quest for gender equality in South Sudan**

In addition to these challenges, the political representation of women, including WHRDs, in peace processes and decision-making bodies remains limited due to the constraints imposed by traditional societal norms.<sup>38</sup> The Transitional Constitution of South Sudan mandates the government to actively encourage women's engagement in public affairs and their presence in legislative and executive bodies, with a target of at least 35% representation as a means of addressing historical disparities. Authorities have made the efforts to achieve this in Parliament, with 32.36% representation of women holding seats in parliament,<sup>39</sup> but this directive is yet to be effectively implemented. Women continue to hold a disproportionately low number of positions at the national level, and their representation is even scarcer at the state and county levels.<sup>40</sup>

Women's voices and perspectives continue to be marginalised, despite their crucial role in building sustainable peace. One activist highlighted how women are automatically dismissed by their male colleagues regarding

security matters. During the African Union summit in February 2023, when she mentioned going to the security committee, they questioned her presence, stating that security is considered a men's issue.<sup>41</sup>

*"Institutionally women are not well represented and don't have a chance or opportunity to raise or discuss their issues"- South Sudanese WHRD.*

*"The government should implement the 35% affirmative action representation for women in governance bodies at both state and national levels."- South Sudanese WHRD.*

### **Legal hurdles, gender bias, and information barriers**

While legal provisions can be invoked and used to protect WHRDs,(as mentioned above) enforcement remains a challenge due to the weak rule of law, impunity, and corruption. WHRDs stressed that they struggle to seek justice for human rights violations they encounter in their work.<sup>42</sup>

*"While there are international laws for the protection of women, obtaining justice can be challenging and time-consuming. There are gaps in national laws, as they do not explicitly and clearly indicate protection measures for WHRDs." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

WHRDs encounter additional obstacles due to gender-based discrimination and cultural norms. With few women serving as judges and an absence of female representation in the Supreme Court, women's cases, particularly those related to GBV, are frequently dismissed in court.<sup>43</sup> Dismissals are influenced by cultural biases which often perpetuate a climate of victim-blaming and stigmatisation

37 Eye Radio, "MPs remove articles on arrests without warrant, send NSS bill to 3rd reading," 13 September 2023, <https://www.eyeradio.org/mps-remove-article-on-arrest-without-warrant-send-nss-bill-to-3rd-reading/>, accessed on 13 August 2023.

38 UNDP, "Study on the Traditional and Changing Role of Gender and Women in Peacebuilding in South Sudan", 4 January 2021, <https://www.undp.org/publications/study-traditional-and-changing-role-gender-and-women-peacebuilding-south-sudan>, accessed on 13 August 2023.

39 IU Parline, "Transitional National Legislative Assembly", [https://data.ipu.org/node/160/data-on-women?chamber\\_id=13580](https://data.ipu.org/node/160/data-on-women?chamber_id=13580), <https://www.undp.org/publications/study-traditional-and-changing-role-gender-and-women-peacebuilding-south-sudan>, accessed on 13 August 2023.

40 OHCHR, "Conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls in South Sudan", 21 March 2023, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/A\\_HRC\\_49\\_CRP\\_4.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/A_HRC_49_CRP_4.pdf), accessed on 13 August 2023.

41 "Interview South Sudan", 2023.

42 Ibid

43 Refworld, "An Independent Judiciary in An Independent State?" <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/530cb3604.pdf>, accessed on 13 August 2023.

for survivors of sexual assault. This bias could even extend to women lawyers due to the significant male representation among judges in South Sudan. Utilising a female lawyer to represent survivors might lead to intimidation by male judges, and they may not receive adequate support from the police during case follow-ups. The subject of SGBV and CRSV remains taboo in South Sudan, and women lawyers emphasised that bringing these cases to court often exposed them to danger and risk.

*“We have never employed a female lawyer. We only work with men because of the impunity and the threats. The environment is not safe for women. Even the law firms are usually male dominated. The main reason is the fear of intimidation and threats as well as the cultural aspect where women are undermined in those spaces.”- South Sudanese WHRD.*

*“Most women and girls experience abuse from people they know, so it would be more appropriate for men to confront other men instead of putting women in such situations. In South Sudan, the cultural norms contribute to a male-dominated society. It is a man’s world.”- South Sudan WHRD.*

Moreover, women in rural areas generally stated that they could not easily access information, and therefore, are unable to effectively undertake advocacy. Several respondents narrated experiences of being denied information, such as, requests for information on GBV cases when following up with the police (notwithstanding standard confidentiality protections). A respondent noted that in Aweil there is little to no access to information due to lack of trust between women groups/ associations, and the lack of coordination among women groups that are scattered across Aweil north and Aweil south.

44

In the face of these cultural, political and legal challenges, WHRDs in South Sudan continue their courageous work, driven by a

commitment to justice and gender equality. Positively, the government of South Sudan is in the process of finalising the proposed Anti Gender-Based Violence Bill, which has been pending before the Minister of Justice since 2020.<sup>45</sup> This bill aims to address and combat GBV by outlawing harmful customary and traditional practices that perpetuate such violence. It also includes provisions for effective procedures for enforcement and monitoring of GBV cases.

Furthermore, the government should set the minimum age of marriage at 18 years, in line with African and international standards. While South Sudan’s 2011 Transitional Constitution and the 2008 Child Act prohibit child marriage, they do not specify a minimum age limit for marriage. As a result, the practice of child, early and forced marriage has continued unabated.<sup>46</sup> Establishing a clear and specific minimum age for marriage aligns with international standards and is essential to protect the rights and well-being of girls.

### **Socio-cultural challenges**

Religious, social, and cultural norms are among the fundamental factors that fuel violations of WHRDs. These deeply ingrained norms can perpetuate discrimination and marginalisation, hindering progress towards gender equality. Additionally, inadequate legislation can create loopholes that allow for the impunity of perpetrators, further exacerbating the challenges faced by WHRDs.

In South Sudan, like in many societies, deeply rooted gender roles dictate the roles and responsibilities assigned to men and women. For WHRDs, this poses a considerable challenge when advocating for human rights and especially women’s rights, as their work inherently challenges these established gender norms. Women are often expected to be submissive and passive, which can lead to criticism and backlash against WHRDs who engage in public activism, promoting human rights, gender equality and women’s empowerment.

44 Interview, South Sudan, 2023.

45 Human Rights Watch, “South Sudan Ratifies Crucial African Women’s Rights Treaty”, 8 June 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/08/south-sudan-ratifies-crucial-african-womens-rights-treaty>, Accessed on 13 August 2023.

46 Ibid

*“When we report on violations, we often face questions about our presence in public spaces. In many instances, the conversation shifts to focus on our roles as mothers and wives or why we might be perceived as dressed indecently.” -South Sudanese WHRD.*

*“In Bentiu, women’s dress codes are policed by the authorities. Women who wear trouser, miniskirts, and short dress are judged for dressing “inappropriately” and are sometimes beaten by the police.” -South Sudanese WHRD.*

WHRDs noted that they often face accusations of being “bad” or “immoral” women, neglectful mothers, while male HRDs are rarely subjected to comparable charges. These accusations are used to justify and incite violence against WHRDs. They endure vilification, name-calling, and accusations of being “prostitutes”. They receive criticism from their male counterparts and are often told that they are wasting their time advocating for women’s and girls’ rights. There are also instances where women hold negative views or judgments towards other women who choose to step out of traditional gender roles and take on an activist role.

*“The community’s mindset is hindering the implementation of our activities. For instance, when we organize a training session on GBV and extend invitations to representatives from both genders, we consistently observe that only male participants attend. When questioned, the men often assert that women should not participate in such training, as their role is traditionally confined to the kitchen and home, and they accuse us of trying to spoil their wives.” - South Sudan WHRD.*

Several WHRDs noted that they face unfair and harmful treatment, including being subjected to sexualisation and derogatory labels such as being called prostitutes. This type of vilification and stigmatisation is a form of gender-based discrimination and a tactic used to discredit and silence WHRDs.

Such actions are not only discriminatory and offensive but also undermine the crucial role these women defenders play in fighting for justice and equality for all.

*“Part of my job as a WHRD is to attend trainings and workshops which are held at hotels. However, some elders and community members find it suspicious for women to be going to hotels frequently, they consider it as a bad thing, like a taboo, they don’t understand that I’m in the hotel for training or workshop.” -South Sudanese WHRD.*

Additionally, in South Sudan, socio-cultural norms and practices in South Sudan create significant barriers for women’s and girls’ education. The prevalence of illiteracy and restricted access to educational opportunities hinder WHRDs’ ability to engage in effective advocacy and capacity-building initiatives.<sup>47</sup> With limited education, WHRDs face difficulties in raising awareness about women’s and girls’ rights and advocating for gender equality, hindering their overall impact.

Furthermore, South Sudan’s reliance on customary law and traditional dispute resolution systems, particularly at the local level in rural areas, often supersedes formal legal channels. These traditional systems do not adequately address issues of GBV and discrimination against women.<sup>48</sup>

*“Many husbands discourage their wives from seeking assistance at our centers or even discussing the domestic violence they endure. We persist in advocating for women’s rights and providing a safe space for them to seek support.” -South Sudanese WHRD.*

South Sudanese customs regarding marriage, specifically the practice of the bride price, are deeply ingrained in the local economic and cultural traditions. The traditional practice of the bride price in South Sudanese marriages can lead to the subjugation of women. By treating women as commodities to be

47 UNDP, “Study on the Traditional and Changing Role of Gender and Women in Peacebuilding in South Sudan,” 2021, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ss/WomenPeacebuildingSouthSudanStudy.pdf>, accessed on 13 August 2023.

48 OHCHR, “Conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls in South Sudan,” 1 April 2022, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/A\\_HRC\\_49\\_CRP\\_4.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/A_HRC_49_CRP_4.pdf), accessed on 13 August 2023.



exchanged for monetary value, this custom reduces their agency and worth to financial transactions.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the payment of bride price can create a sense of indebtedness in the woman towards her husband's family, which may perpetuate the notion that she is a possession rather than an equal partner in the marriage. Research conducted in Africa has found a connection between the payment of bride price and its negative consequences on women,<sup>50</sup> including domestic violence.<sup>51</sup>

The requirement for the return of the bride price in case of divorce poses significant challenges for women in abusive marriages. This practice can act as a deterrent for women to leave abusive relationships, as they fear potential financial repercussions for themselves and their children. Consequently, women may be led to endure abuse silently.<sup>52</sup> The emphasis on reconciliation, even in cases of abuse, to avoid the repayment of the bride price can perpetuate a culture of impunity for abusers. This fosters an environment where domestic violence is normalised and tolerated, further undermining women's safety and dignity.

*"WHRD cases involving GBV don't go through legal justice, they negotiate it in the community". -South Sudanese WHRD.*

Another harmful practice that perpetuates gender inequality is an inheritance practice, where a woman loses her husband's property and depends on his family's goodwill for support after his death. This can leave widows and their children in vulnerable positions. Decisions regarding the widow's future and the well-being of her children rest solely with the deceased husband's family, leaving the widow with little to no control.<sup>53</sup> This lack of autonomy can lead to dire consequences for widows, particularly if they face disapproval or rejection from the husband's family.

WHRDs have raised concerns about the absence of formal documents among women living in rural areas. This issue presents significant challenges, especially when trying to engage with and assist these women. Convincing them to participate can be difficult due to resistance from their husbands and the broader community. One of the major problems faced by these women is the lack of essential identification documents such as national identification documents, birth certificates, or age assessment certificates.

The absence of these documents creates barriers for women when they attempt to address the issues they face. For instance, filing a case is nearly impossible without proper identification.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, not having official documents deprives them of their right to vote and makes it difficult for them to own land.

Consequently, WHRDs may encounter obstacles when seeking justice for women's rights violations, as these frameworks may not prioritise women's rights adequately.

*"We try to stand up for our rights most times, but the community feel concerned, and they often discourage us from doing our work" -South Sudanese WHRD.*

*"Within our community, we face the perception that, as women, we should remain silent, particularly when it comes to discussing cases of GBV. This belief is often justified by the notion that men have the right to handle such matters, especially in areas where male chiefs hold significant influence. Although there are some female chiefs, they are still not permitted to address these issues openly." -South Sudanese WHRD.*

Moreover, WHRDs challenging socio-cultural norms often face stigmatisation and isolation

49 Sage journals, "Hove, M., & Ndawana, E. Women's Rights in Jeopardy", 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017737355>, accessed on 13 August 2023.

50 Journal of Southern African Studies, "(Re)negotiating the meaning of lobola in Southern African secondary schools, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/823409>, accessed on 13 August 2023.

51 National Library of Medicine, "Implications of bride price on domestic violence and reproductive health in Wakiso District", 2005, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1831942/>, Accessed on 13 August 2023.

52 Sage journals, "Women's Rights in Jeopardy, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017737355>, accessed on 13 August 2023.

53 UNDP, "Study on the Traditional and Changing Role of Gender and Women in Peacebuilding in South Sudan," 2021, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ss/WomenPeacebuildingSouthSudanStudy.pdf>, Accessed on 13 August 2023.

54 Interview, South Sudan, 2023.

from their own communities. Their activism, aiming to disrupt traditional values and power dynamics, is often viewed as a threat, leading to ostracisation and social exclusion. This isolation can further hinder their advocacy efforts and personal well-being.

*“The cultural norms and the community do not give women their rights. They believe that women can’t lead men or be in any leadership position. We also experience disrespect as WHRDs, and this is very challenging. For example, when we conduct training as women, they will not listen or pay attention. This discourages me and I feel like I don’t want to go ahead.” -South Sudanese WHRD.*

*“The absence of emotional support and the isolation can negatively impact WHRDs. Spending considerable time and energy on our work while constantly receiving negative comments can lead to an emotional breakdown. WHRDs require both well-being and psychosocial support”- South Sudanese WHRD.*

## Intergenerational divide

African cultures frequently reinforce negative stereotypes and discrimination against youth, who are seen as inexperienced and unwise. This negatively affects contributions made by young people to discussions, dialogues, or community development.<sup>55</sup> Some WHRDs raised concerns about the intergenerational divide in the human rights space. Young women claimed that they faced intersectional discrimination because of their gender and age.

*“Knowledge expires if it is not shared but it expands when older HRDs mentor and create opportunities for younger HRDs, helping to bridge the generation gap.” -South Sudanese WHRD.*

*“You often notice that the same CEOs*

*are repeatedly chosen for advocacy engagements, while young WHRDs are often underestimated. They think we lack knowledge and experience.” -South Sudanese WHRD.*

While having more younger women engaging as defenders is a positive development, the lack of proper mentorship and guidance is concerning.<sup>56</sup> The nurturing aspect of mentoring helps WHRDs develop essential skills, coping mechanisms, and resilience, which are vital in their often challenging and risky work. Without proper mentorship, younger WHRDs may witness the hardships and dangers faced by their senior counterparts, including physical harm and psychological stress. This can deter them from actively joining the human rights defense movement. The fear of experiencing similar struggles might lead to a scarcity of young women willing to take up this important role in the future.<sup>57</sup>

*“There are more younger women as defenders which is a beautiful side. The nurturing bit is missing, and that becomes dangerous. When they see how some WHRDs get bruises, it will be difficult for others to join. We might see scarcity soon. They might want to apply for jobs outside where they are safe.”-South Sudanese WHRD.*

*“There is an intergenerational gap. They are not giving space to the new generation. Conflict of interest arises. When the new generation comes in to find new methods, they are seen as going against older HRDs.”-South Sudanese WHRD.*

## Economic challenges

In South Sudan, where persistent economic difficulties exist, the effects on women including WHRDs can be significant and diverse.<sup>58</sup> This section delves into the ramifications of the prevailing economic situation on WHRDs. In conflict-prone regions,

55 DefendDefenders, “Pushing Boundaries”, December 2022, <https://defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/PBoundaries.pdf>, Accessed on 13 August 2023.

56 Interview, South Sudan, 2023.

57 Ibid

58 World Bank, “Empowering South Sudan’s women and girls is key to fostering peace”,

26 May 2023, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/nasikiliza/empowering-south-sudans-women-and-girls-key-fostering-peace>, accessed on 13 August 2023.

WHRDs often face heightened risks due to the interconnectedness between economic instability and violence.<sup>59</sup> Considerable evidence suggests that one potential outcome of economic hardship is violence. The impact of conflict disproportionately affects women and girls, further exacerbating the challenges faced by WHRDs in their human rights efforts.

WHRDs and women-led organisations encounter obstacles in resource mobilisation for advocacy due to economic instability. Limited funding and capacity to raise funds are major concerns for many WHRDs interviewed. These challenges extend to funding activities, technical capacity for women's rights promotion and protection, and the availability of human resources. As a result, their ability to organise campaigns, workshops, and networking events is hampered, significantly reducing the overall impact of their work.

Furthermore, the existing gender-based economic disparities exacerbate challenges for WHRDs. With limited access to education, formal employment, and financial resources, WHRDs often find it difficult to sustain their activism.

In situations where WHRDs face threats, the absence of sufficient resources for security measures and relocation leaves them vulnerable to intimidation, violence, and other risks and threats, hampering their essential work. Some respondents mentioned delays in receiving assistance from HRD protection organisations, making it difficult for them to sustain themselves or ensure the safety of their families without personal finances.

The economic challenges may hinder access to justice for WHRDS as they seek legal representation and resources to address human rights violations and defend themselves against false accusations. This further perpetuates a cycle of inequality and impunity.

*“Legally, it's very costly to get a lawyer for your case and most women can't afford*

*that. Also, culturally, women are told they should not go to the court as it is seen as an embarrassment, and sometimes the community members will be advised not to go to court because they say as a woman you are going to spoil your name and reputation”- South Sudanese WHRD.*

Moreover, the work of women defenders also takes a toll on their health and well-being. Reduced access to healthcare and essential services directly impacts their ability to advocate effectively and contributes to a decline in their overall capacity. Despite the prevalence of mental health challenges within this group, there is a lack of adequate attention and support remarked a WHRD. Many organisations, primarily due to limited resources, are unable to provide the necessary care for the mental well-being of WHRDs.

Economic constraints pose challenges for WHRDs, limiting their ability to travel to significant conferences, workshops, and international events.<sup>60</sup> These events offer crucial opportunities for networking, collaboration, and skill development, which in turn affects their professional growth and advocacy impact.

Further, women defenders with families and young children face additional barriers as many conferences and workshops lack support for mothers with children. The absence of sponsorship or assistance for mothers prevents them from participating in events that could otherwise enhance their work. <sup>61</sup>For instance, one WHRD had to decline an invitation to a Human Rights Council session because there was no budget to accommodate her breastfeeding child.

## **Digital challenges**

Digital activism presents unique obstacles, notably increased surveillance affecting all HRDs, including WHRDs. WHRDs have reported experiencing cyber harassment and being targeted by internet “trolls.” In South Sudan, defenders disclosed encountering

59 National Library of Medicine, “A Comparison of County-Level Economic Measures in the Prediction of Violence-Related Injury”, 29 August 2022, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9900694/>, accessed on 13 August 2023.

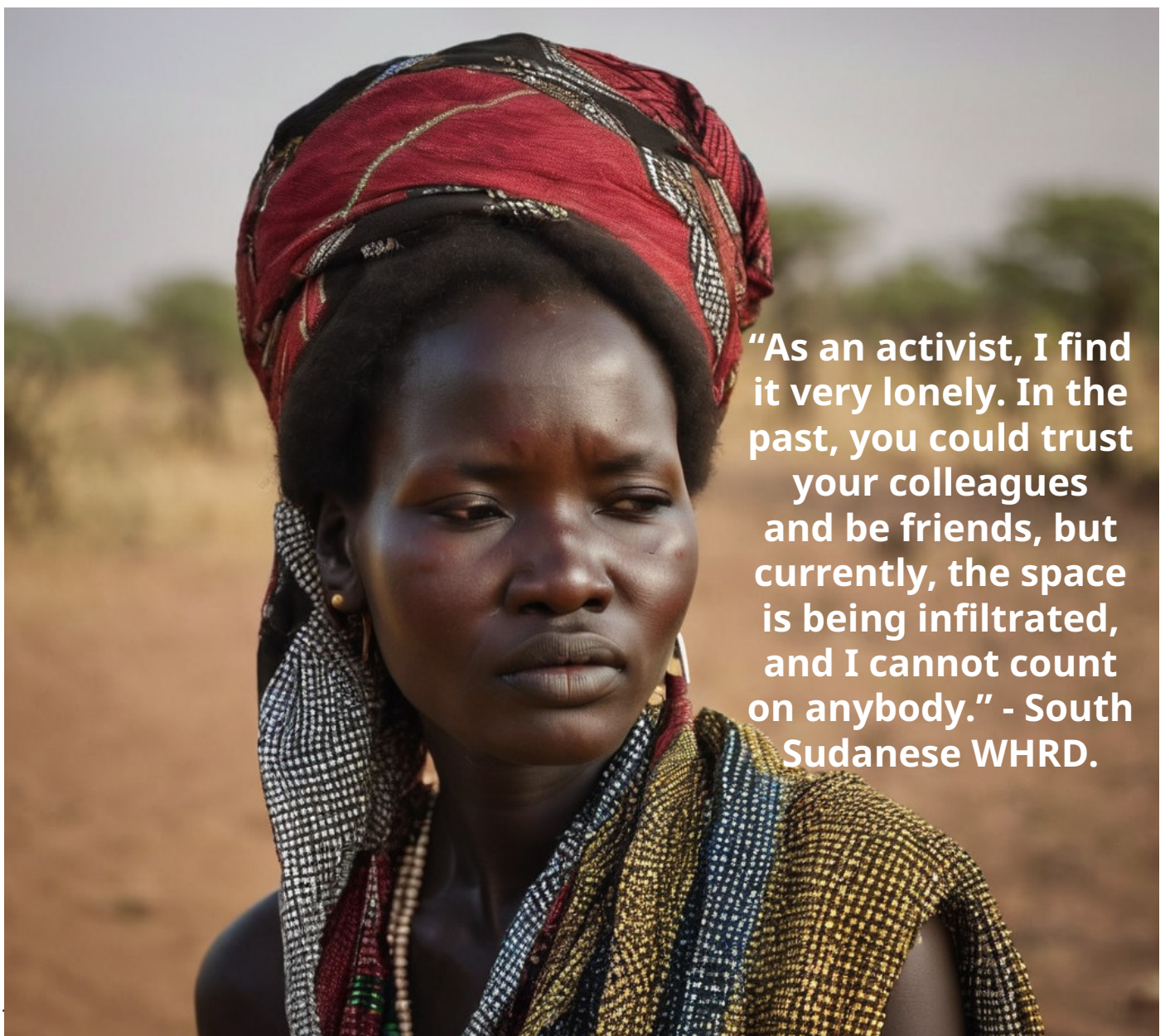
60 Interview, South Sudan, 2023.

61 Ibid

hateful and sexist remarks on social media platforms. Moreover, they are targeted by online smear campaigns aimed at tarnishing their reputation and undermining their credibility. Shockingly, young WHRDs face the distressing use of nudity and manipulated images as a means of threatening and intimidating them on social media, with their faces edited onto explicit content and disseminated.<sup>62</sup>

WHRDs expressed growing apprehensions about their digital security capacity. One significant challenge hindering digital activism is the evident gap between urban and rural WHRDs, which adds an additional barrier to their online efforts. Most WHRDs who were interviewed pointed out that women in rural areas face limited access to smartphones and a stable internet connection. Moreover, concerns were raised about the affordability of internet services and data, making it difficult for some women to engage in digital activism.

Furthermore, the infrastructure in many states does not support digital activism, as some regions lack consistent power supply. However, there is a glimmer of hope as communication companies have recently started installing cell towers in rural areas, which is a positive development since it will eventually make internet access easier and more affordable.



<sup>62</sup> Interview, South Sudan, 2023.

# RISKS AND THREATS

WHRDs interviewed during this study. It examines the risks and threats they face, while identifying emerging and persistent trends. To comprehensively understand the most common and severe types of threats faced by WHRDs interviewed, the testimonies collected were categorised into the sections below.

An overwhelming majority of the WHRDs (91%) reported personally experiencing at least one of the following risks or threats:

- Stigmatisation and humiliation connected to actions that are considered sensitive in South Sudan;
- The use or threat of use of sexual violence e.g. rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment, intimidation;
- The use of sexual and gender stereotypes due to social and cultural beliefs and tradition;
- Repression by the government, as well as opposition by families and communities; and
- Attacks on reputation of women human rights defenders and their families e.g. uttering defamatory statements hinged on sexual character or relationships and spreading of rumors about them to destroy their credibility in society.

It's important to note that while most women experienced multiple threats, others might have only experienced one. Overall, findings demonstrate that an overwhelming majority of women are targeted simply because of their gender and their activism.

A majority of WHRDs interviewed (64%) reported experiencing stigmatisation and humiliation related to actions considered sensitive in the country, for example support for victims of sexual violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, the right to access land for women, the women, peace and security agenda, transitional justice and accountability. Their advocacy for human

rights is often met with societal biases and prejudices, leading to negative perceptions and isolating them socially. This hampers their ability to continue their activism effectively.

An alarming percentage of WHRDs (54%) faced the use or the threat of sexual violence, including rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. These heinous crimes are used as tools to suppress and silence women who dare to stand up for their rights and the rights of others. Fear of such violence discourages women from engaging in human rights activism, posing a serious threat to gender equality and women's empowerment.

58% of the women defenders interviewed reported experiencing the imposition of sexual and gender stereotypes based on social and cultural beliefs while carrying out their activism. These harmful stereotypes undermine the legitimacy of their work and portray their activism as inappropriate or conflicting with societal norms. Challenging these harmful beliefs is crucial for creating a supportive environment for WHRDs.

*"The society expectations make it difficult for WHRDs to do their work. As a woman, you can't stay late in meetings, your family or community will have a problem with it." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

*"This is a story for many WHRDs. When you are visible and outspoken, they tell you are not a 'good wife' or a 'good mother.' You are accused of not caring about your family." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

*The term 'WHRD' is seen negatively, they look at it as a new terminology and it is viewed as western idea. Additionally, when a woman advocates for other women, or human rights in general, the community automatically believes you are against the culture." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

The opposition faced by WHRDs is not

limited to the government; it extends to their own families and communities. 52% of WHRDs experienced threats and risks from multiple fronts, including legal threats, social ostracisation, and physical violence. This creates an extremely challenging and hostile environment for WHRDs to operate in.

56% of respondents faced attacks on their reputation and their families through defamatory statements and the spreading of rumors. These malicious tactics are employed to discredit WHRDs in society, making it difficult for them to gain public support and allies for their cause. Furthermore, such attacks put their personal safety at risk.

The analysis underscores that the threats faced by WHRDs in South Sudan are interlinked with, and deeply rooted in gender-based discrimination and societal norms. Women who bravely advocate for human rights are unjustly targeted because of their gender and activism. Addressing these challenges is crucial not only for the well-being and safety of WHRDs but also for advancing gender equality and protecting human rights in the country.

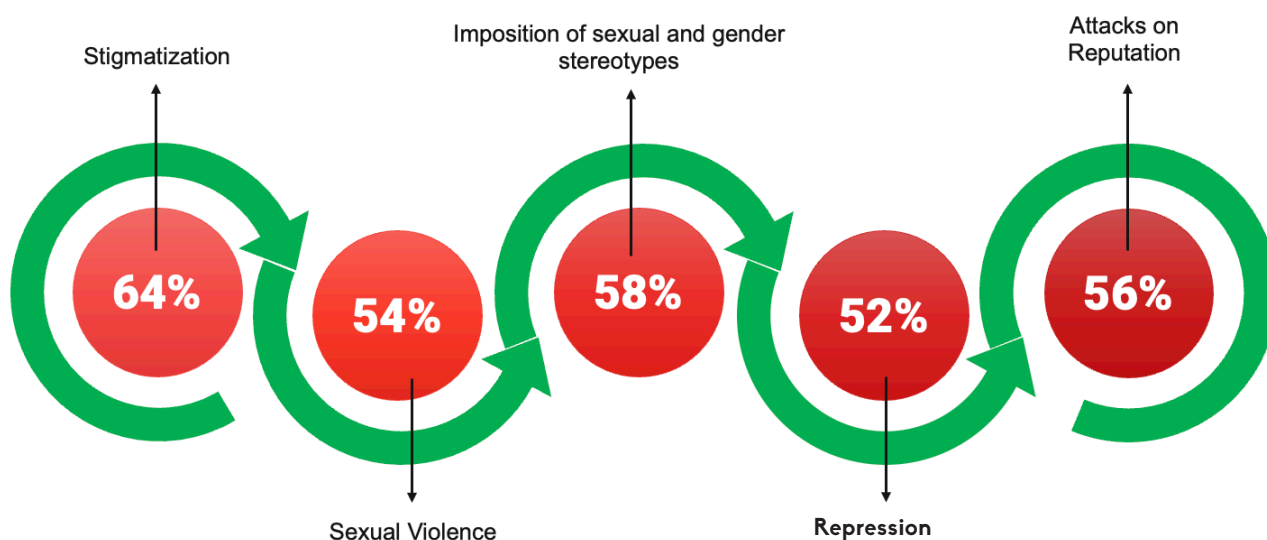
## Perpetrators

Among the various categories of perpetrators, non-state actors, particularly religious and community leaders, emerged as the primary abusers of WHRDs in South Sudan. A total of 24 out of 46 interviewees reported violations were directly attributed to non-state actors. This finding correlates with the prevailing risk of stigmatisation faced by WHRDs. As WHRDs challenge entrenched traditional norms and power structures, they often face resistance and hostility from conservative religious and community leaders, leading to stigmatisation.

Furthermore, it is disheartening to note that even colleagues of WHRDs can become perpetrators of abuses. Internal conflicts, personal rivalries, or opposition to their work may lead to undermining or targeting WHRDs within their own organisations or activist circles. An alarming 19 women defenders interviewed reported facing threats from their colleagues, mostly reporting on cases of sexual harassment in their work places.

Abuses against women and girls committed in the private sphere, including the family and community context, often without direct intervention or acquiescence of state agents, were traditionally not considered to be “human rights” issues but rather private (civil or criminal) matters.

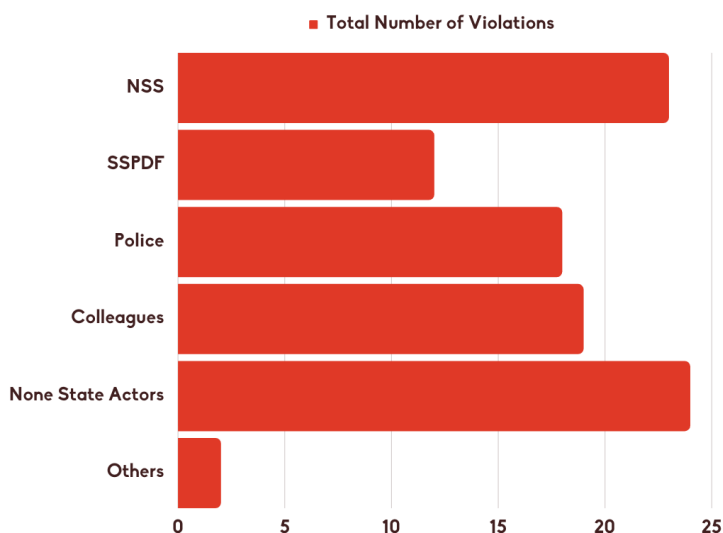
## SUMMARY OF THREATS AND RISKS



It is now recognised that “the obligations of States to protect and fulfil human rights clearly encompass the duty to protect women from violations committed by third parties, including in the private sphere, and to take positive steps to fulfil their human rights. [...] States have obligations to address acts committed by private actors.” States have a duty to exercise due diligence to prevent violations and abuses and, when they occur, to investigate them, prosecute and punish perpetrators, and provide victims and survivors with redress.<sup>63</sup>

However, the risks do not emanate solely from non-state actors. State actors, including the NSS, the South Sudan People’s Defense Force (SSPDF), and the South Sudan Police Service, also pose threats to WHRDs. The NSS was responsible for 23 violations against the WHRDs interviewed, while the SSPDF and police were involved in 12 and 18 violations, respectively. Additionally, other government officials can contribute to violations against WHRDs, especially when they perceive the defenders’ advocacy and activism as a challenge to their authority and influence. A total of 22 WHRDs reported facing violations from other government officials.

 **Violation BreakDown of the 46 women interviewed**

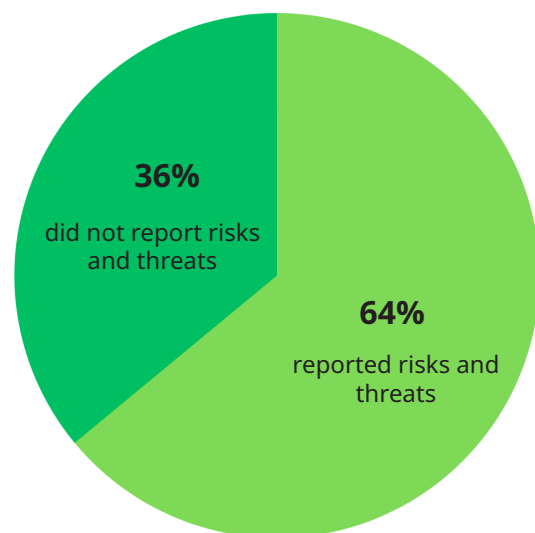


Note: It’s important to note that most WHRDs experienced threats from multiple perpetrators

The interconnectedness of these risks underscores the gravity of the challenges faced by WHRDs in South Sudan. Their crucial work in promoting human rights and gender equality is met with resistance and violence from various quarters, both within and outside the government. The prevalence of stigmatisation highlights the societal barriers that WHRDs confront, making it essential to address deep-rooted gender-based discrimination and transform harmful norms and beliefs.

**Reporting**

According to the research findings, 64% of the WHRDs who faced risks and threats chose to report these incidents to the rightful authorities. However, 36% did not report the threats and risks they encountered.



Among the WHRDs who reported, the majority faced violations from non-state actors or colleagues. It was observed that reporting to the authorities was relatively easier when the perpetrators were not affiliated with the state. However, for those who reported violations involving state actors, including the NSS, the police, and other government officials, the outcomes were often unsatisfactory. Many noted that either “nothing happened” after the report or the investigation remained “pending,” indicating a lack of accountability and effectiveness within the justice system.

*“I haven’t reported because in 2013, I was involved in an accident that was orchestrated by a government official to intimidate me.”*

63 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Women’s Rights are Human Rights,” Geneva and New York: United Nations Publication, 2014, ISBN: 978-92-1-1-154206-6, pp. 26-27.

*When I tried to report the incident, the people in the NSS warned me that it's better not to report because doing so would put my life in danger." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

On the other hand, a significant majority of WHRDs stated that they did not report to the rightful authorities due to several compelling reasons. One primary factor was the lack of trust in the authorities, primarily stemming from a history of corruption, impunity, and authorities' own involvement in human rights violations. The research found that many WHRDs viewed reporting as futile or even dangerous, as they harbored concerns about potential retaliation or reprisals from the very institutions and officials that are supposed to protect them.

*"I haven't reported because the perpetrator is a man in uniform, and they belong to the same authority that is supposed to take action to protect me." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

*"We are afraid to report to the authorities because it could lead to another threat. In most cases, we report to the SSHRDN seeking support, not necessarily to address the issue directly, as the government should be responsible for that." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

This lack of trust in the justice system and fear of reprisals can deter WHRDs from seeking legal recourse for the violations they face. The prevailing culture of corruption and impunity further contributes to a climate where reporting violations to authorities may not yield the desired results, leaving WHRDs feeling vulnerable and unprotected.

*"I also know in the work we do, when the survivor is under threat their threat is extended to you." - South Sudanese WHRD.  
"If the perpetrator is the NSS, who do you report to? They are at the highest level. But in cases involving non-state actors, I report to the police."*

Some WHRDs noted that reporting violations to authorities may lead to further targeting and endanger their safety or the safety of their

families and communities. Others believed that the justice system is biased or inefficient, especially when dealing with cases involving powerful perpetrators, such as government officials or influential non-state actors.

*"In 2016 when the conflict was ongoing, a 60-year-old woman was raped by a soldier and when they reported the case, the perpetrators was moved to Juba and the victim was taken to the barracks and beaten. When the community found out they advocated for her release. Thereafter, the matter escalated, and the threat extended to the community and family members. They target even those not involved with the case." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

*"I do not want to get more stress because they escalate these issues from one case to another. Sometimes you report and then you are arrested, the victim can become the perpetrator in the eyes of the law." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

Previously, women who have reported have been subject to victim-blaming and social stigma, particularly in cases of GBV. Other WHRDs simply do not report because they fear judgment or ostracisation from their communities, which can further isolate them and hinder their work.

*"I can't report because the community would be involved, and they will take it negatively." - South Sudanese WHRD.*

When questioned about whether they had ever reported to the SSHRDN, 86% of women defenders responded with a "no" They provided several reasons for this.

The primary reason cited by the majority of WHRDs, especially those in rural areas, was their lack of awareness about the existence and role of the SSHRDN. Many of these defenders were unaware of the network's existence, its purpose, and how it could assist them in addressing violations they faced. Additionally, some WHRDs lacked knowledge about their rights and the legal avenues available to seek redress. This lack of information made it challenging for them to navigate the reporting process, leading



them to refrain from reporting incidents to the SSHRDN.

Furthermore, the absence of reliable protection mechanisms for WHRDs and the time-consuming nature of verifying cases were mentioned as factors discouraging reporting. Some WHRDs expressed concerns about their safety and security after making a complaint, fearing potential retaliation or further risks. Without a guarantee of adequate protection, they chose to remain silent to avoid additional vulnerabilities.

*“The network needs urgent response for protection. If they take three weeks to come to your rescue the risk might materialise, and this might deter other WHRD from doing their work.”*

However, it is worth noting that a few women defenders did report challenges they faced to the Network. Most of the women defenders who did report to the SSHRDN expressed satisfaction with the support they received, which indicates that the Network was successful in providing the required assistance to those who sought its help.

The tendency for WHRDs to seek protection mechanisms less frequently than their male counterparts can be attributed to several factors. These include gender stereotypes, lack of awareness, fear of reprisals and institutional barriers, such as not having a gender inclusive protection mechanism. Moreover, many women frequently engage in HRD work without recognising it or identifying themselves as HRDs/WHRDs. Between May 2022 and May 2023, the SSHRDN received reports from only ten WHRDs.<sup>64</sup>

## Needs

Based on the interviews conducted, a common concern for WHRDs is their insufficient capability to effectively monitor, report, and document human rights violations. They pointed out that some WHRDs lacked the necessary skills and knowledge related to human rights issues. Additionally, it was observed that both the public and government officials were equally lacking

in awareness and understanding of human rights standards. This lack of knowledge has impeded WHRDs' ability to assert their rights, advocate for them, and aid in protecting and promoting human rights.

The significance of addressing this issue was particularly emphasized in rural areas. WHRDs stressed the importance of enhancing the capacity of fellow WHRDs through training and resource mobilisation. This would enable them to effectively engage with the public, including at the local level, as well as government authorities. The goal is to foster a shared understanding between rights holders and duty bearers, ensuring that human rights are respected and realised by all parties involved.

WHRDs also called for support to build strong networks and strengthen already existing networks. This is especially the case for WHRD in rural areas or outside Juba. These networks can effectively connect and support isolated WHRDs including those in hard-to-reach geographical areas.

WHRDs in South Sudan require substantial support related to their well-being, particularly in terms of emotional support. Engaging in human rights work, particularly in the face of negative comments and overwhelming time commitments, takes a toll on their emotional state. WHRDs urgently need access to well-being and psychosocial support services. Providing them with resources and assistance in managing stress, emotional distress, and burnout is crucial for sustaining their resilience and dedication to their vital work.

*“The constant exposure to negativity and criticism lead to emotional breakdowns, affecting our overall mental health.”*

<sup>64</sup> See annex 1

# CONCLUSION

South Sudanese WHRDs play an instrumental role in advancing gender equality, human rights, and justice in the midst of a complex and protracted conflict. WHRDs, alongside women peacebuilders, journalists, and civil society leaders, have consistently raised their voices and spearheaded campaigns.

Accountability remains a crucial challenge for South Sudan's peace process, and WHRDs rightly advocate for the swift establishment of transitional justice mechanisms. Ensuring that women are actively involved in these processes is essential, as their perspectives and contributions are vital to achieving lasting reconciliation and healing.

It is important to emphasise that South Sudanese women's achievements do not happen in isolation. They require support and collaboration from civil society partners, the community, and the government. Together, they can create a more equitable and just society.

While the challenges are formidable, the resilience, determination, and collaborative efforts of South Sudanese WHRDs offer hope for a more inclusive, rights-respecting future. The path forward is marked by ongoing support and solidarity, both within the nation and from the international community, to amplify the voices and efforts of WHRDs and ensure that their contributions lead to lasting change.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **To the government of South Sudan**

- Review, revise, and implement existing legislation to respect, protect and effectively fulfill civic space-related rights;
- Implement existing national, regional, and international frameworks that protect women human rights defenders.
- Adopt national legislation that recognises and protects human rights defenders including women human rights defenders. Ideally, this will be a comprehensive legislation that specifically addresses the protection of women human rights defenders. This legislation should recognise the vital role women defenders play in society and impose penalties for any acts of violence, harassment, or intimidation against them.
- Establish specialised protection mechanisms for women human rights defenders, including dedicated police units and helplines, to respond promptly to any threats or attacks. These mechanisms should prioritise the safety and security of women human rights defenders and ensure their complaints are taken seriously and effectively addressed.
- Conduct training programs and awareness campaigns for law enforcement officials, judiciary, and security personnel to sensitise them about the critical work of WHRDs and the need to protect their rights. This will help reduce instances of gender-based violence and discrimination against women human rights defenders within state institutions.
- Address underlying gender inequalities and societal norms that contribute to violence and discrimination against women human rights defenders. Encourage gender-sensitive policies and programs that promote women's rights and gender equality.
- Initiate a dialogue with women human rights defenders and their organisations to understand their concerns, challenges, and needs better
- Establish a comprehensive data collection and monitoring system to track incidents of violence and threats against women human rights defenders. This will help in identifying patterns, assessing risks, and formulating evidence-based policies to improve their safety.
- Enhance the presence of women in all government institutions, striving to attain a balanced representation of 35% as stipulated in the Transitional Constitution.
- Promote diversity in decision-making spaces, encompassing various genders, social classes, and ethnic backgrounds, both within government entities and public organisations.

## **To United Nations bodies and mechanisms, including the United Nations Human Rights Council**

- Through regional and country offices and in-house capacity of the office, provide specific support on women's rights, including regarding compliance with international standards and implementation of recommendations formulated by United Nations human rights bodies and mechanisms.

## **To African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights**

- Establish indicators for monitoring and ascertaining the measures taken by States to ensure the protection of women human rights defenders.
- Hold state parties accountable for their obligations to end impunity for violations against human rights defenders including women human rights defenders.
- Urge states to use the information in the Guide and Guidelines on the protection of women human rights defenders in Africa to design their country-specific legal and administrative measures and strategies to fulfil their commitments to protect human rights defenders.

## **To development partners**

- Allocate increased financial resources to support protection initiatives focusing on the holistic security of women human rights defenders. This includes addressing physical, digital, and psychosocial dimensions of security to ensure the safety and well-being of defenders.
- Provide sustainable funding to organisations that monitor and document human rights violations.
- Ensure that funding for women human rights defenders is sensitive to their protection needs and long-term sustainability.
- Support women human rights defenders in accessing and utilising regional and international protection mechanisms.

## **To South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network**

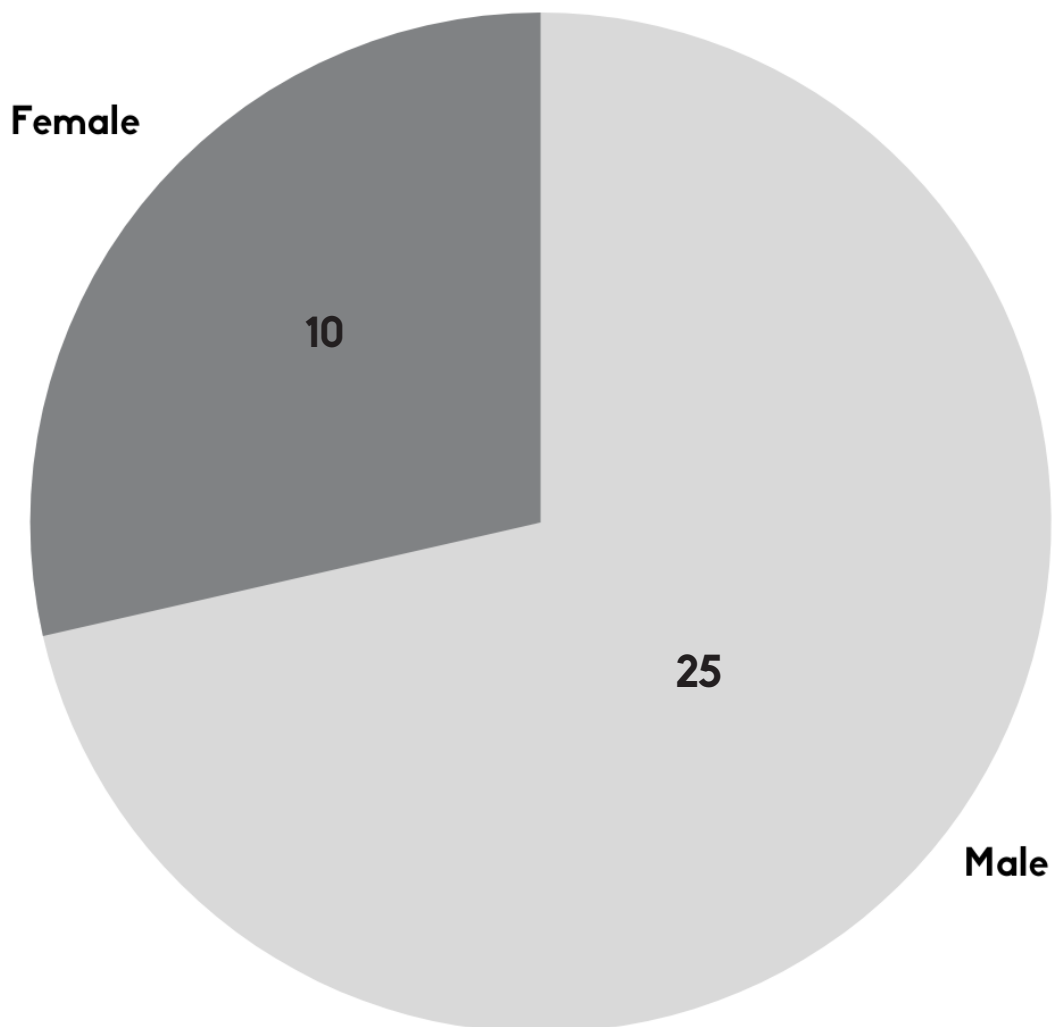
- Advocate for funding support to carry out activities in the state, enabling the network to effectively support and protect women human rights defenders.
- Ensure the presence of South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network in each state to mentor and support women human rights defenders and address local challenges effectively.
- Collaborate with women human rights defender organisations in the state to lobby the parliament and address critical issues, such as the land policy, affecting women's rights.
- Create platforms for sharing experiences and awareness training, encouraging more women to speak up and report violations.
- Address the specific needs of women human rights defenders with disabilities and ensure that reporting mechanisms are accessible and inclusive.
- Provide training on digital literacy and national and international human rights frameworks, while also offering mental health support to women human rights defenders.
- Contextualise programs and initiatives to ensure they resonate with the local community and are perceived as relevant and meaningful.

## **To civil society organisations**

- Conduct training sessions on women's and human rights including women's rights in schools to raise awareness among students and promote a culture of respect for women's rights from a young age.
- Provide support and capacity-building to media houses in the states to enhance their role in awareness-raising and promoting human rights issues.
- Conduct comprehensive awareness campaigns targeting key government officials and uniformed servicemen at all administrative levels.
- Regularly monitor human rights-related issues and conduct gender audits to address gaps and challenges faced by women human rights defenders.
- Equip women human rights defenders with skills to strengthen their strategic planning, effective governance mechanisms, risk assessment, fundraising, human resources, and financial management.

# ANNEX

Pie Chart showing data of clients reported and handled by the SSHRDN between May 2022 - May 2023



DefendDefenders (the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project) seeks to strengthen the work of HRDs throughout the subregion by reducing their vulnerability to risks of persecution and by enhancing their capacity to efficiently defend human rights.

DefendDefenders is the secretariat of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network, which represents thousand of members consisting of individual HRDs human rights organisations, and national coalitions that envision a sub-region in which the human rights of every individual as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are respected and upheld.

 [www.defenddefenders.org](http://www.defenddefenders.org)

 +256 200 760 700

 [info@defenddefenders.org](mailto:info@defenddefenders.org)


 @defenddefenders

 /defenddefenders




South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network (SSHARDN) is a non-profit, non-political civil society network that is recognised by the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC). It is a coalition of civil society organizations and individuals working to protect and promote of human rights in South Sudan. It is also a member of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network.

 <https://sshrdn.org>

 +211 926 222 596

 [admin@sshrdn.org](mailto:admin@sshrdn.org)

 @sshrdNetwork