

Policy brief

August 2025



SGBV patterns and risks in South Sudan-Sudan's repeated cross-border displacement

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Summary

The Sudan-South Sudan border has long been a hotspot of instability, marked by protracted conflict, displacement, and socio-economic challenges.¹ It is well evidenced that within this volatile context, women and girls have faced heightened vulnerability to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), which is a pervasive and deeply entrenched issue.² SGBV in this region is not only a consequence of ongoing insecurity but also a tool of oppression and control used by armed actors,³ exacerbated by systemic inequalities, weak governance, and limited access to justice and support systems.⁴

This briefing paper maps out some of the patterns of SGBV within the context of repeated displacement and bi-directional cross-border displacement between Sudan and South Sudan, with a focus on:

1. The extent and patterns of SGBV currently occurring on both sides of the Sudan/South Sudan border, and how these are influenced by the intersection of protracted conflict (in South Sudan), more acute conflict (in Sudan), and forced displacement (in both directions);
2. The role of SGBV as both a driver and an outcome of cross-border displacement between Sudan and South Sudan.

Context and background

After years of conflict with Sudan's central government, South Sudan became an independent state in 2011. The reigniting of violence in South Sudan in December 2013 caused an estimated 2.3 million people to be displaced from South Sudan, including

1 IOM (ed), 'South Sudan –Fragility Study Report – Understanding Multidimensional Fragility in South Sudan - 2023'. IOM South Sudan. 2023.

2 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Briefing note, '[UNHCR warns of devastating spike in risk of gender-based violence for women and girls forced to flee](#)', 29 November 2024. Accessed 10 Dec 2024.

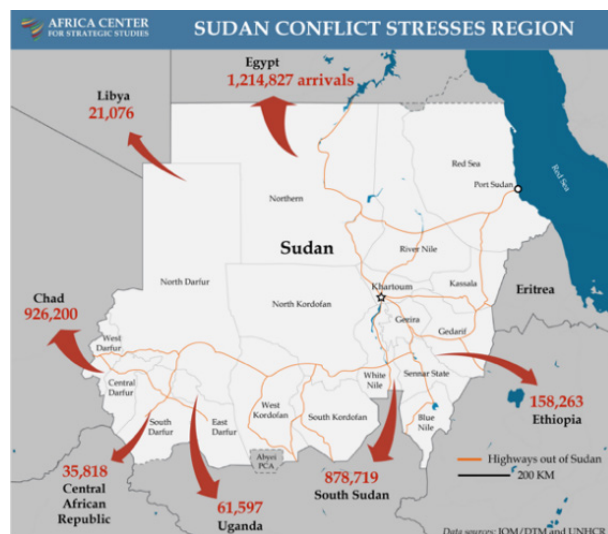
3 Ajok, L., '[SGBV: a tool used to instill fear in Sudan's armed conflict](#)', *Africa Centre for Justice and Peace Studies*, 22 November 2023. Accessed 12 March 2025.

4 Widaatalla, N., '[Bodies into Battlefields: Gender-based Violence in Sudan](#)', *Think Global Health*. Accessed 12 March 2025.

over 800,000 to Sudan.⁵ Another two million people were also internally displaced within South Sudan.⁶ More recently, conflict in Sudan has jeopardized South Sudan's peace efforts and worsened the existing humanitarian crisis as thousands flee from Sudan,⁷ many of whom are returning to a fragile South Sudan. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that as of 1 December 2024, approximately 1 million people have crossed the Sudanese border into South Sudan through formal border crossings, the majority of whom initially fled to Sudan during the South Sudan war.⁸ Médecins Sans Frontières also reports increasing numbers of persons crossing the border using informal routes.⁹

The enduring conflict and resultant forced displacement in South Sudan, coupled with the ongoing hostilities in Sudan, have led to repeated cross-border migration and internal displacement, with significant effects on women. These impacts have manifested as physical, sexual, and psychological violence—including rape, sexual abuse, human trafficking, and forced prostitution—afflicting women on both sides of the border. Even before the 2023 war in Sudan, 50-65% of South Sudan women had experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes, making South Sudan one of the highest-ranking countries globally for SGBV.¹⁰ There are no updated statistics available for how the war in Sudan and resultant displacement have impacted rates of SGBV in South Sudan, but previous research has indicated that SGBV risks are very high, especially in border regions.¹¹ While there is incontrovertible evidence about the prevalence of SGBV in South Sudan, particularly in the northern border regions, there remains a need to better understand how conflict and cross-border displacement intersect with SGBV. Charting patterns and rates of SGBV in those border regions and understanding drivers that affect those patterns are crucial to ensuring appropriate

and adequate SGBV service provision, as well as informing SGBV prevention strategies.



Source: Sudan Conflict Straining Fragility of Its Neighbors, Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

Figure 1. Sudan Conflict Stress Region.

Women and girls are often disproportionately impacted by armed conflict, displacement, and temporary settlement. Due to the ongoing conflict, many South Sudan women are now the heads of households in a patriarchal setting,¹² increasing their risk of reproductive coercion with heightened exposure to transactional sex, as well as resultant unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (including HIV and AIDS).¹³ Women and girls endure high levels of interpersonal violence on both sides of the border between Sudan and South Sudan, exacerbated by repeated and forced cross-border displacement.

5 Solomun, J., 'South Sudanese refugees return to their troubled home', *Al Jazeera*. 8 May 2023.

6 UNHCR, 'Operational Data Portal - Refugee Situation South Sudan', UN, 2024. Accessed 8 November 2024.

7 Centre for Preventative Action Global Conflict Tracker, 'Civil War in Sudan', Centre for Preventive Action. Accessed 5 December 2024.

8 UNHCR, 'Operational Data Portal - South Sudan', UN, 2024. Accessed 5 December 2024.

9 Médecins Sans Frontières, 'Intensified violence in Sudan drives thousands to flee to South Sudan.' Accessed 20 December 2024.

10 Ellsberg M, Ovince J, Murphy M, Blackwell A, Reddy D, Stennes J, et al. (2020), 'No safe place: Prevalence and correlates of violence against conflict-affected women and girls in South Sudan', *PLoS ONE* 15 (10).

11 Sullivan DP, Boru Halakhe A., 'Return to a Displaced Nation: The Sudan Crisis and South Sudan's Returnees', *Refugees International*, 2023. Accessed 9 December 2024.

12 Oxfam International, 'No Simple Solutions: Women, Displacement and Durable Solutions in South Sudan', 2019. Accessed 4 February 2025; Logo, HK, Shah, O, Watson, C., 'Gender norms, conflict sensitivity and transition in South Sudan', July 2022. Accessed 4 February 2025.

13 Stark L, Ager A., 'A systematic review of prevalence studies of gender-based violence in complex emergencies', *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 2011;12(3):127-34; UN Women, 'Women and Girls of Sudan: Fortitude amid the flame of war', Sept 2024.

Research overview

To develop contextually specific, culturally sensitive, and victim/survivor-centred interventions to prevent and address SGBV, we studied the cross-border migration experiences of women and girls in order to determine how SGBV serves as both a driver and an outcome of cross-border displacement between Sudan and South Sudan. The findings aim to inform strategies for the prevention of SGBV during cross-border displacement, and to identify the supports needed for SGBV survivors in the Sudan/South Sudan border region.

Over a 2-week period from mid to late July 2024, self-identified Sudanese refugees and South Sudanese returnees, both female and male, aged 13 and older, were invited to participate in the study. Although the focus was on the migration experiences of women and girls, males were included as in previous sensemaking projects, men and boys tended to share more candid micronarratives about experiences of SGBV.¹⁴ A convenience sample of participants was recruited from various public spaces, including refugee/returnee reception centres, aid distribution points, and markets. We made a concerted effort to recruit members of equity-deserving groups, including persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+ individuals, and those facing extreme poverty. Using purposive sampling, among a diverse participant population, who had crossed the border from Sudan into the Aweil region in north-west South Sudan (across formal and informal border posts) were asked to share experiences of women and girls during migration. Participants were subsequently asked to interpret their narratives through a quantitative questionnaire which focussed on the extent and patterns of SGBV at the Sudan/South Sudan border and the role SGBV played as both a driver and as a consequence of cross-border displacement between Sudan and South Sudan.

Key findings

We collected 695 stories from 671 unique participants.¹⁵ The majority of respondents (over 88 percent) were female. A majority of participants

were also returnees. About 98 percent of the stories shared were about South Sudanese women and girls migrating back to South Sudan from Sudan. A significant proportion of the narratives were first-person experiences (64 percent) or about a family member (10 percent); see Figure 2.

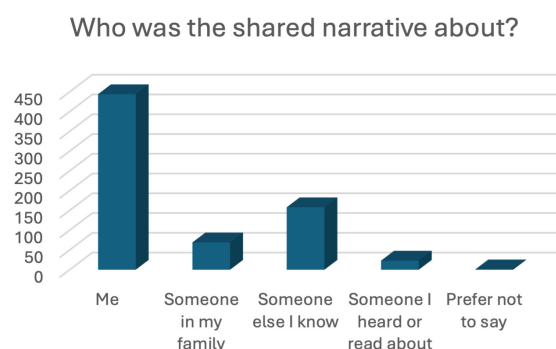


Figure 2. Who was the shared narrative about?

The overwhelming majority of narratives had a strongly negative (70.5 percent) or negative (24 percent) emotional tone, with less than 1.5 percent of all stories being about positive experiences.

We analysed the triad that considered drivers of cross-border migration as illustrated in Figure 3. Each small grey dot represents an individual participant's response. The different coloured letters represent the geometric means of all responses for that age group. The figure shows confidence ellipses for each age group¹⁶ with no statistically significant difference among age groups. As the triad in Figure 3 shows, across all age groups participants were more likely to select violence as a reason for migration over poverty and looking for a better future. Two illustrative quotes are included, providing examples of how experiences of SGBV in Sudan directly contributed to the decision to migrate.

Participants were asked whether SGBV was the reason for migration or occurred as a result of migration. For all age groups, SGBV was a strong driver for their migration, rather than a consequence of migration (Figure 4). The younger the respondents, the more strongly SGBV was interpreted as a

14 Bartels S, Michael S, Roupetz S, Garbern S, Kilzar L, Bergquist H, et al., 'Making sense of child, early and forced marriage among Syrian refugee girls: a mixed methods study in Lebanon', *BMJ Global Health* 2018;3(1):e000509-e.

15 Participants were permitted to tell more than one story; each individual story was then self-interpreted by the respondent.

16 Geometric means and 95% confidence intervals were calculated using 'R scripts' for each age group and are represented graphically as 95% confidence ellipses. These ellipses are considered statistically different when the 95% confidence ellipses do not overlap. Wickham, Hamilton, R CoreTeam, De Long 32-34.

driver of migration. Again, two quotes illustrate how experiences of SGBV directly led individuals to flee Sudan. Interestingly, the quotes also demonstrate how men were affected by witnessing violence perpetrated against their female relatives.

Asked to reflect on the kind of insecurities that women and girls experience in the settlements, a significant majority of respondents judged that financial insecurity outweighed threats or experiences of sexual or physical violence (Figure 5).

What factors drove cross-border displacement for the woman/girl in your story?

I came during the time of the war, and my 12-year-old child died in the process, as we were many vulnerable women at that time. Arabs forced themselves on us women, and girls leading to death of a young girl. We came on foot, mourning and in pain to South Sudan, looking for freedom for girls and women to have a peaceful life.
ID# 70293 South Sudanese woman age unknown

It all happened one evening when we were asleep - the rebel forces attacked the neighborhood. They reached our place ordering all men to come out and women to remain indoors. They later entered all our rooms and slept with young girls and even elderly women. This caused our journey to South Sudan...
ID# 70004 South Sudanese adolescent aged 14-18

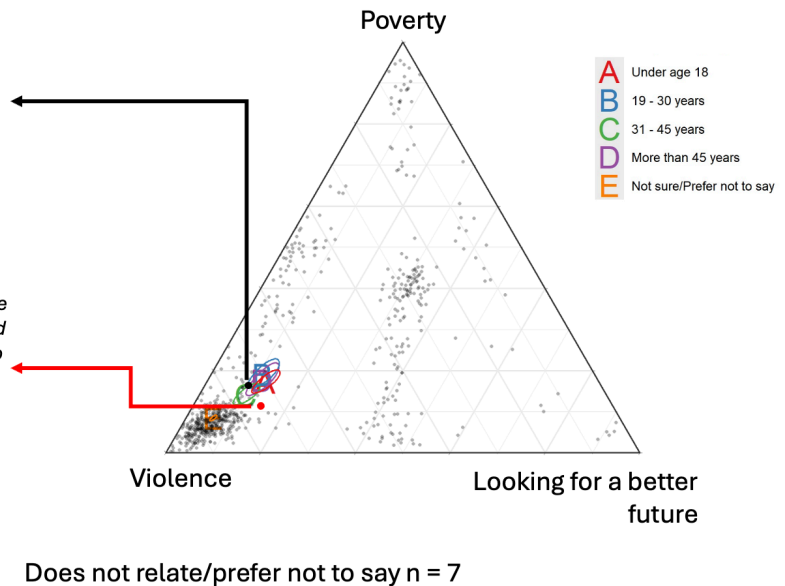


Figure 3. Drivers of cross-border displacement.

Sexual and gender-based violence....

... armed men came to my house at night when I was not around... Two of them entered into the room. They wanted to rape her, but she resisted and she was shouting for rescue from the neighbours. The armed men got scared, and one stabbed her on the side with a knife. They then ran away. By the time neighbours went to her rescue, she had bled too much. She was rushed to near by health unit but she passed on. This scared me to travel to South Sudan.
ID# 70898 South Sudanese man aged 31 – 45

There were many bad things which happened to women/girls... what happened was that I was raped by two people for two days in the bush without eating while those rebels could eat and smoke drugs. After two days in the bush, I came on the road and I got a vehicle which took me to South Sudan.
ID# 70892 South Sudanese woman aged 19-30

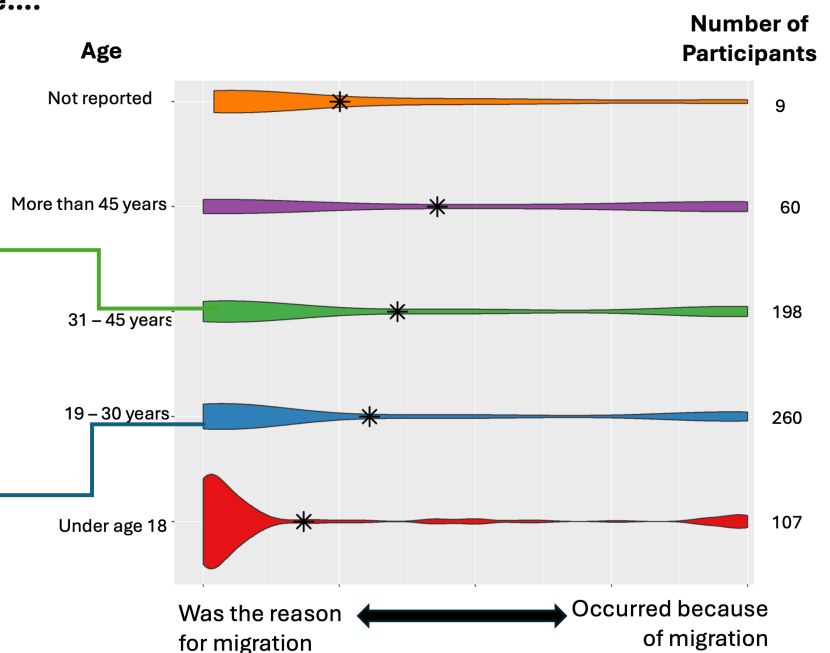


Figure 4. Perspectives on whether SGBV was the reason for migration or occurred because of migration.

What forms of violence does the woman/girl in your story face in their host community/settlement?

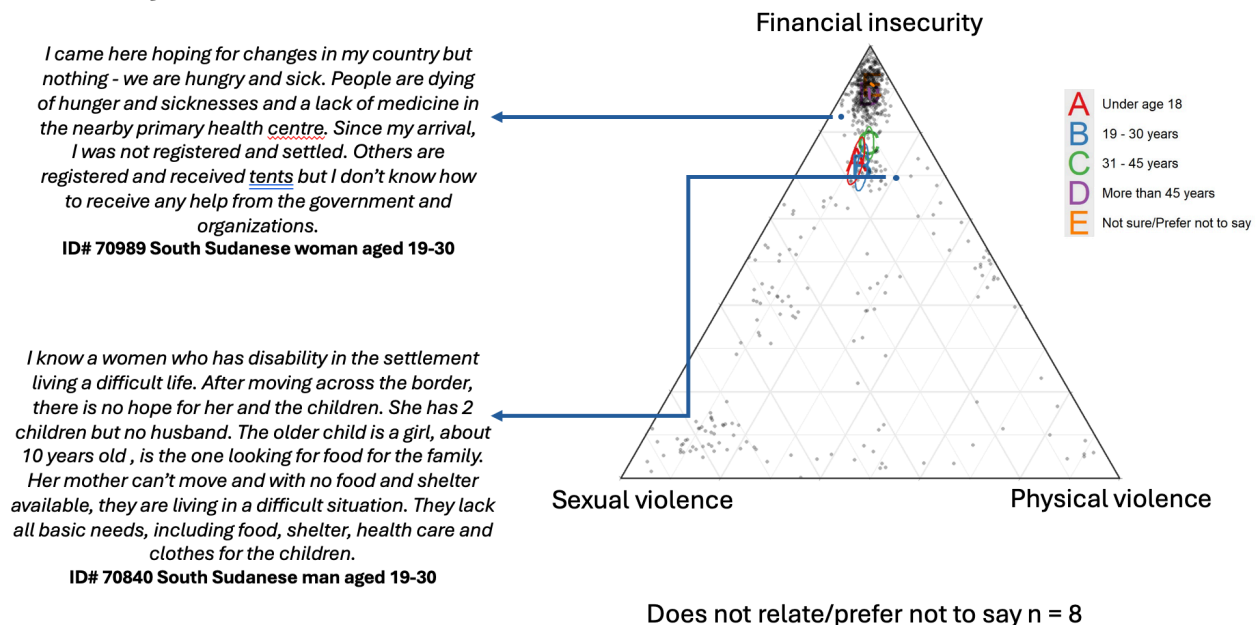


Figure 5: Forms of violence experienced by women and girls.

In contrast with the violence experienced prior to migration, post-migratory challenges primarily revolved around food insecurity, lack of medical care, inadequate shelter, or insufficient clothing, as highlighted in the quote. The second quote demonstrates how these challenges are amplified for women with disabilities, who are often more confined in their living conditions, with young children acting as caregivers and carrying the burden of managing these insecurities.

Discussion and recommendations:

Research has identified SGBV on the Sudan/South Sudan border as a major driver of cross-border migration among South Sudanese families, with a significant majority of research participants citing violence as a primary reason for their displacement. While data on SGBV in Sudan - qualitative and quantitative - is scarce and no prevalence data exists, a qualitative assessment conducted by UNFPA on gender-based violence in Sudan has

documented widespread reports of sexual violence, early and child marriage, rape, and female genital mutilation.¹⁷ The Humanitarian Country Team for Sudan has warned of the likely devastating and widespread abuse for women and girls across the country; this is coupled with a rise of sexual exploitation driven by food insecurity and water scarcity, along with severely limited access to essential post-rape care and support services for survivors.¹⁸ Our research confirms these assessments, with widespread reports of SGBV reported as driving migration from Sudan. However, many participants described living in poverty and were unable to meet their basic needs such as food, shelter, and medical care. While this aligns with existing literature that highlights the increased vulnerability of women and girls to SGBV during armed conflicts, the data provides new insights about how SGBV precipitates cross-border migration. Research participants' perceptions of refugee/returnee settlements as places of relative safety contrasts with some previous research that has documented high rates of SGBV in South Sudan and in refugee camps and settlements more generally.¹⁹

17 'Voices from Sudan 2020: a qualitative assessment of gender based violence in Sudan', UNFPA & Government of Sudan. 2020.

18 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 'The Humanitarian Country Team in Sudan is deeply alarmed by a rise in conflict-related sexual violence', 26 September 2024.

19 Ibeck, R., 'Protecting Women from Violence in the United Nations Protection of Civilian Sites, South Sudan', *Journal of Intervention and Peacebuilding*, 18(1) (2003); Murphy, M. et al., 'Risk and Protective Factors for Violence Against Women and Girls Living in Conflict and Natural-Disaster-Affected Settings: A Systematic Review', *Trauma Violence Abuse*, 24 (5) (2022).

The challenges of meeting basic needs such as food, shelter, and medical care often overshadow concerns around physical safety. This underscores the complex interplay between physical security and human security, highlighting that freedom from physical and sexual violence does not necessarily equate to overall well-being or safety.

lack of basic necessities including food, clean water, and shelter, leaving them particularly vulnerable to SGBV. Provision of these basic necessities needs to be prioritised for PWDs alongside other vulnerable groups, including unaccompanied minors.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, we recommend the following policies to address the complex relationship between conflict-related SGBV and cross-border migration between Sudan and South Sudan.

- The high levels of pre-migratory and migratory experiences of SGBV strongly suggest that, from a programming perspective, NGOs, government agencies, and UN bodies should focus on expanding SGBV prevention, risk mitigation and response services in Sudan, along migration routes, and in border areas. This should include increased funding and support for comprehensive services such as medical care, psychosocial support, and legal assistance.
- The extent and intensity of SGBV experiences, coupled with the reported lack of access to medical services in the South Sudan settlement camps, suggests an urgent need for mobile medical camps with specialists targeting survivors of cross-border SGBV. The program should target both the Sudan and South Sudan settlement camps.
- Cross-border cooperation should be enhanced through bilateral agreements between Sudan and South Sudan as a crucial element in improving coordination on SGBV prevention; risk mitigation and response; and prosecution of perpetrators across borders. Cross-border cooperation should address child abductions with access to rescue, disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programming, and trauma supportive services.
- Economic empowerment programs that combine SGBV services with livelihood support and basic needs assistance are essential to addressing the poverty and lack of resources reported by many participants, which, if unaddressed, will add to the vulnerability of women and girls to further sexual exploitation and abuse in their host communities.
- Data confirms that pre-migratory and post-migratory vulnerabilities and challenges are amplified for persons with disabilities (PWDs), through a

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