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Women's evolving livelihoods and shifting gender norms in Western Bahr el Ghazal State, South Sudan

The report investigates how women in crisis-affected pastoralist and farming communities adapt their livelihoods through bricolage: the creative combination of various small-scale income activities.

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Rural livelihoods in Western Bahr el Ghazal State, South Sudan, face challenges from protracted conflict, climate shocks, and economic instability. As men's roles are affected by migration, conflict, and hardship, they often step back from household provisioning, leading women to take on more responsibilities both at home and in income generation.

However, there is limited understanding of how women's livelihoods are changing, and of the factors influencing their adaptation. Addressing this gap is key for designing interventions that support women's role in household resilience.

The report investigates how women in crisis-affected pastoralist and farming communities in rural and peri-urban locations in Wau and Jur River counties diversify and adapt their livelihoods through bricolage – the creative combination of various small-scale income activities. It seeks to uncover the key enablers and barriers to these strategies, assess their impact on gender norms and household decision-making, and generate insights to guide humanitarian and development interventions that enhance women's resilience and empowerment.

Findings:

- Women engage in livelihood bricolage by combining activities such as crop farming, livestock rearing, petty trade, charcoal burning, tailoring, and tea making – managing multiple income streams both simultaneously and seasonally.
- This strategy is driven by both necessity and deliberate risk management to cover

essential household expenses and buffer against shocks. While it increases women's workloads, it also reflects their agency, resilience, and innovation.

- Women's economic contributions strengthen their influence over household decisions and community leadership, despite resistance from traditional gender norms.
- Key enablers include robust social networks, Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), supportive spouses, self-confidence, and vocational training.
- The shift in gender roles is gradual, with younger generations more supportive of gender equality and women's leadership expanding in some areas.

Policy implications:

- Support women's livelihood bricolage and adaptive strategies through practical skills training, tools, and better market opportunities.
- Strengthen social capital through savings groups, cooperatives, and peer learning networks.
- Invest in infrastructure and services like healthcare, education, transport, and childcare, to reduce women's workloads and enable equitable participation.
- Promote legal reforms to secure women's land and leadership rights and ensure protection against gender-based violence.
- Address structural barriers by expanding access to credit, productive inputs and tools or technologies that reduce labour burdens.
- Commit to sustained gender-transformative programming that challenges restrictive norms and promotes shared household decision-making and women's leadership.
- Engage men as partners in gender equality to transform social relations and support women's empowerment.



Elderly Southern Sudanese recently returned from Darfur, in Wanjok, near Aweil, Northern Bahr el Ghazal State - Image by Paul Banks / UN - CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

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