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ISSUE BRIEF

NARRATIVES OF CHANGE

Women's reflections on evolving productive roles in the Agar Dinka community

Elizabeth Nyibol Malou and Adrian Cullis

Key findings

- **Agar Dinka women have long played central roles in crop production, livestock care, food management and income generation**. With men increasingly absent due to conscription, conflict or economic migration, women are now assuming increasing responsibilities.
- **In rural areas, women often lead in farming and livestock management**, while displaced women in towns take on emerging roles in humanitarian work, wage labour and small-scale enterprise.
- **Beyond their economic roles, women continue to be the backbone of family and community life**, particularly in caring for children and elderly relatives.
- **According to their own narratives/accounts**, younger women tend to be more open to new opportunities, while older women often express concern about the loss of traditional structures and support.
- **Agriculture and livelihood-related policy processes must reflect this shift and fully involve women as active decision-makers**, not merely as recipients or beneficiaries of policy interventions planned for men.

Proportional piling – a data collection method for quantifying women's customary and contemporary roles – during a focus group discussion, Tumic Village, Rumbek Centre, 2025 © Elizabeth Nyibol Malou

Introduction

This issue brief explores the evolving productive roles of Agar Dinka women in South Sudan amid the increased absence of men due to conscription, conflict and economic migration. As a result, women have taken on greater responsibilities in both agricultural and livelihood activities. The research draws primarily on women's first-hand accounts, highlighting their perspectives on the drivers of these changes, the challenges they face, and the trade-offs they are required to navigate. These findings and narratives are intended to inform future agricultural and livelihood policies in South Sudan.

The lead author, together with a team of local researchers, facilitated 25 focus group discussions in Rumbek North, Rumbek Centre, Rumbek East and Wulu Counties with a total of 212 participants, alongside 29 key informant interviews, in January and February 2025. The research was supported by the Early Career – Localising Research programme of the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) initiative.

Using participatory methods and a semi-structured questionnaire, women focus group members were invited to share their experiences on four themes: women's customary productive roles, women's contemporary productive roles, drivers of change, and the advantages and disadvantages of change. With agreement, the discussions were recorded and subsequently transcribed by the lead author. A sample of the participants' observations is presented in the next section.

In their own words

The observations in this section are organised around key research themes. Interviews were organised in 22 villages as follows:

- Matangai, Mabui, Abeer, Timic, Akol Jal, Deng-Nhial and Mabor-Ngap in Rumbek Centre County
- Chuei-Chok, Maleng-Agok, Pacong, Mathiang, Aduel, Paloch, Atiaba, Akot Tiit-Lou and Amethagok in Rumbek East County
- Malueeth, Meen, Amok, Alor and Maper in Rumbek North County
- Malou-Jiec in Wulu County.

Interviewees requested that no personal information was presented in the brief, and the quotes are therefore not attributed to specific individuals. Every effort has however been made to present participants' views in their own words, recognising that women's voices are often marginalised in policy-making processes. In some cases, slight adjustments were made to enhance clarity for the reader.

Women's customary productive roles

Agar Dinka agro-pastoralists have traditionally combined mobile livestock keeping with seasonal subsistence cropping. Within this, interviewed women described their customary roles in caring for livestock, subsistence cropping and supplementing household diet by collecting wild fruits and vegetables.

- 'Women cleared land for planting millet and sorghum by burning bushes and grass. The land was then cultivated by hoe and seed planted that had been kept from the previous harvest. Young plants were weeded and water carried to young plants affected by dry spells. Women identified and selected the best grain-heads for next year's seeds. Grains and seeds were stored separately.'
- 'In the morning, I untethered the young cattle and sent them for grazing under the care of young boys to areas where there was soft grass. I also built, cleaned and mended the shelters where the youngstock are kept at night. Women moved with the cattle camps. We milked the animals, processed the milk and provided it to our family members. In times of plenty, we also shared with our neighbours.'
- 'We gathered many different kinds of wild fruits – shea nuts, lulu and lalop fruits, wild dates, tamarind, baobab – and different kinds of wild leafy vegetables, which were good for children and the elders.'
- 'Women did so many things in the home. This is why men paid such high bride-prices. Men often paid more than 100 cattle.'

Women's emerging productive roles since 2005

The interviewed women explained that today they play quite different roles in the life of their communities. They explained that this was the result of conflict, cattle raiding and civil war, which had resulted in many men leaving home to fight, or to avoid being conscripted. Many men have also been injured and killed. With fewer men left in the villages, women are increasingly required to manage the livestock and produce crops.

- 'So many men joined the army, that we (women) were forced to look after the livestock. Most families have fewer cattle today – lost to cattle raiding and disease – and we must therefore spend more time in the fields. Far-off fields are however not safe.'
- 'Today, fewer women live in the cattle camps, as it is not safe, especially during the dry season when the cattle raiding occurs. Women who are displaced face

so many challenges to feed, clothe and educate their children. Without any help from men, women work harder in the gardens and finding employment. Women live such different lives today than in former times.'

- 'When the men are away, we look after cattle, including taking care of sick animals. We now buy vaccines and livestock medicines. Many women rear and sell chickens, while others work in the fields of a wealthy person so they can buy animal medicines. This is the first time that women have done this, and it is a big achievement.'

- 'We have many new ways of working, including in groups of 10–15 that meet each week to save together. Each month the money is given to one woman, until all group members have received. Then, we start again. Every member now has a small business or has bought households items.'

Drivers of change

The interviewed women identified key 'drivers of change' including the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of the Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in January 2005. This resulted in the payment of civil servants for the first time in many years and the arrival of a 'money economy'.

The 'money economy' has fundamentally changed how men and women perceive their productive lives, including experiencing rapid urbanisation as new employment opportunities were created. Urbanisation has been increased by more recent conflict and civil war, leading to widespread displacement, as has climate change, especially later-onset and much heavier rains, which have substantially increased flooding and made crop production more difficult.

- 'After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, civil servants received their monthly salaries. They made purchases and started small businesses. This attracted family members and people looking for employment. Pastoralists also started to sell their livestock to traders and butchers as cattle prices went up. It was a good time in South Sudan.'

- 'The civil wars of 2013 and 2016 were violent times. Located here near the border with Greater Upper Nile region, the Lakes State suffered badly. Only when Rin Tueny Mabor was appointed Governor did security start to improve. Before this, we regularly clashed with our neighbours. They raided our cattle and we raided theirs.'

- 'Recurring fighting and cattle raiding interrupted us even when we were growing crops, and many fields were abandoned. As the farmed area became smaller, so did the harvest, and there was much hunger.'

Key informant interview between a senior woman pastoralist and Elizabeth Nyibol Malou, lead author, Tumic Village, Rumbek Centre © Alek Mabor Khalil

- 'So many of us lost our husbands to conflict and cattle raiding after Independence. We therefore no longer keep cattle close to our homes as this attracts raiders. Without livestock, we have less food and the price of food in the markets has increased significantly.'

- 'Women who have lived as refugees have learned many new things: cooking and cleaning in other people's houses, working in the fields, managing small businesses and studying. Some women have studied and gained certificates. Some have returned to work with government, international organisations and private organisations. Most, however, are no longer agro-pastoralists.'

Advantages and disadvantages of change

This section presents women's personal perspectives on feelings about the processes of change.

Main advantages

- 'I am very pleased that Dinka women are recognised by NGOs and can receive vocational – tailoring, waitressing, hairdressing – and business-skills training and grant support. Some women have even opened milk bars in Rumbek. They buy milk from women, and when they cannot sell all their raw milk, they make yoghurt and ghee and get even higher prices in the market.'

- 'I did not think the COVID-19 pandemic would have positive outcomes as markets were closed. However, people bought directly from farmers, including women

farmers. These relationships have continued, with women selling milk, yoghurt, ghee, field crops, wild fruits and even livestock directly to consumers. This has resulted in better prices.'

- 'Young women can move from place to place to find work. I have nieces working in Upper Nile and Equatoria in universities and other good jobs. Our daughters now return home as graduates, and they compete with men for jobs. When they get good jobs, they gain independence and can buy their own cattle, land and houses. All this has happened since Independence. All these good things have happened because of education. Education has opened our eyes.'

Main disadvantages

- 'Education has taken our children. They now think that working in the farms is dirty work. They go to school early in the morning and they return late in the afternoon, as they hawk goods in the market for cash. Some keep the cash and, by not supporting their families, they make life difficult for their mothers.'

- 'Everything now has a value (land, labour, food) and less is done with the support of family and neighbours. High food prices – the result of hyper-inflation – means we cannot afford to buy enough food, which is not something we experienced in the past. When food prices increase, so too do theft, cattle raiding and all sorts of other bad things.'

- 'Young women used to access land through their mothers, and married women through their husbands. Land is now bought and sold – and only the wives of rich and powerful men can afford to buy land. This is because cash is everything now.'

- 'Gender-based violence has increased. I think it is conflict that drives men to be more promiscuous and violent, as men used to sing romantic songs and pay high bride-prices to win their brides. Today, a young woman who is raped keeps it to herself, as telling others could result in her not marrying. But she may then experience severe mental health issues.'

Discussion

The section above on women's customary productive roles offers insights into a once-vibrant Agar Dinka agro-pastoral production system that blended extensive cattle keeping and subsistence farming.

While recognising different male and female productive roles, women spoke of their dual roles: livestock production – calf-rearing, milking and processing milk products – and crop production – land preparation, planting, weeding, harvesting, drying and storage. They also stated that they were the main collectors of wild fruits and vegetables.

As one interviewee noted, the importance of women's work in the Agar Dinka agro-pastoral production system was best illustrated in the exchange of large numbers of cattle in brideprice payments, with hard-working young women traditionally commanding a higher price.

The importance of brideprice and marriage was also recognised in building social networks among families, clans and sections, and the failure or delay in the fulfilment of brideprice arranged could trigger conflict. This confirms the findings of other research, that pastoral livestock are an important form of wealth accumulation (Catley, 2018).

Women also highlighted the many changes in their productive roles. For example, they said that, while in the past women migrated with their cattle in cattle camps, today, fewer women and children live in the cattle camps.

Non-migratory women typically function as women-headed households and have sole responsibility for the care and education of children and supporting elderly relatives. Such women are also more vulnerable to rape, abduction and murder, when cultivating remote fields or collecting wild fruits and vegetables, as there are fewer young men in the community to defend them, and they are perceived to be more vulnerable.

For these reasons, women reported that they and their daughters increasingly engage in wage labour to generate income to support their families, as there are typically fewer risks. This finding is confirmed by the lead author's earlier work in Western Bahr el-Ghazal (Malou, 2024).

Significantly, some of these changes are reflected in the use of new words that have been incorporated into the Dinka language. While many have Arabic roots, *borochot* – a localised word for the English word 'parachute' – is commonly used to describe paid agricultural labour. *Borochot* implies something that one opportunistically 'jumps', 'descends' or 'drops' into and has the connotation of the insecurity of casual work.

As evidenced above, the women identified conflict as the primary driver of change. Indeed, women highlighted their extreme levels of exposure to conflict during the first Civil War (1983–2005),[1] and those within the newly independent South Sudan of 2013 and 2016, as well as ethnic-based feuds, cattle raiding, revenge killings and gender-based violence as a weapon of war. While

1 The civil war between the North and South.

the interviews offered little detailed analysis of causes, many interviewees recognised that life for the rural Agar Dinka, was 'not like this in the past' (Deng, 2021).

In saying this, they challenged the neocolonial research framing of Jeffery Deal in the early 2000s, who suggested that the customary life for the Agar Dinka was characterised by 'personal vengeance' and that this 'was all that satisfied the delicate sensibilities of the tribes, families, clans, sub-clans and seemingly endless factions of South Sudan'. He also argued that 'this feature of South Sudanese culture creates an atmosphere of constant tension and the threat of violence' (Deal, 2011, cited in Cormack, 2018).

More plausibly, and certainly in line with the findings of this research, Cormack suggests that the Agar Dinka people do not fight 'because of who they are' but rather as a result of the 'consequences of the militarisation of almost every level of society during the civil war, including the large-scale and often forcible recruitment of young people into the army' (Cormack, 2018). As has been found elsewhere around the world (Santa Barbara, 2006), once exposed to high and sustained levels of violence, whether in the army or various militias, life is never quite the same again as society and moral codes are forever changed, especially in children.

Pendle (2017) also supports the 'not like this in the past' view and reports that the escalation of violence in South Sudan is the result of 'decades of militarised, violent conflict and elite wealth acquisition' that have ruptured the 'once shared landscapes between communities' including the Agar Dinka and Nuer.

Some of the women interviewed, both members of focus groups and key informants, offered value-based reflections on the changes taking place in the Agar Dinka community, including the penetration of the cash economy. As indicated above, opinions were divided.

Some saw that, through education, young women had increasing agency and could live very different and less restricted lives, including owning their own land, cattle and other valuable assets.

In contrast, others regarded the changes as a threat to Agar Dinka culture. Significantly, the lead author recalls that positive expressions of change were cited mainly by younger women, while older women expressed greater reservation and even sadness and regret.

The findings of the study resonate strongly with the findings of early field research carried out by the lead author in Western Bahr el-Ghazal, as part of a wider Rift Valley Institute research initiative (Malou, 2024).

Among other findings, Malou (2024) offers the following analysis:

> [H]istorically, rural women had two primary labour burdens: cultivating, weeding, harvesting, storing and preparing food for household consumption and providing essential life-giving labour such as childbirth, child-rearing and household maintenance. These were unpaid labours. Now, they face a third burden: producing surplus food for sale and selling their labour for cash payment to afford essential services such as healthcare and education.

The same study notes that:

> ...as food, labour, and land become commodities, women's working lives are transforming. The process of 'commodification' shifts rural life towards producing surplus food for profit rather than household sustenance. This change has led to the devaluation of unpaid work, adding to the cultural and social shifts in South Sudanese communities.

Conclusions

This 'narratives of change' study presents Agar Dinka women's first-hand accounts of their customary and emerging productive roles, drivers of change, and the benefits and costs of shifts. These narratives make it abundantly clear that, whether through customary or new emerging roles, women are central to the survival and well-being of the Agar Dinka family and communities.

Their contribution spans a wide range of important activities including crop farming, caring for young livestock, managing household food, milking cows and selling processed milk products, as well as harvesting wild fruits and vegetables. Despite their indispensable role, women are typically under- represented in decision-making processes that shape agricultural programming and policy.

To create sustainable and inclusive development outcomes, it is increasingly important that women – regardless of whether they continue in customary roles or adopt new ones – are actively consulted, meaningfully engaged and equitably represented at each stage of livelihood planning, implementation and policy formation. Ignoring their voices risks undermining the very people that have sustained, and continue to sustain, rural communities.

The value of women's productive, reproductive and community roles are reflected in longstanding cultural practices like the brideprice paid in cattle among

the Agar Dinka. While the practice of brideprice has remained largely unchanged for generations, other aspects of women's lives have changed significantly since many men are absent due to conflict, conscription or migration.

As a result, women are now assuming increased responsibilities for household livelihoods – making decisions about cattle movements, animal care and sales, or pursuing alternative income sources when access to livestock and land is limited. Women also continue to care for children and elderly family members.

These expanded roles make it even more important that women's work is fully recognised and that women are included as key stakeholders in all agricultural programming and policy. Their insights and leadership are critical to ensuring that interventions reflect current realities and effectively support household and community resilience.

While climate change, the growth of the cash economy and evolving farming systems are all drivers of change, the research identified conflict and cattle raiding as the primary forces reshaping Agar Dinka women's livelihoods. These disruptors impact every facet of women's productive roles – from farming and livestock keeping to gathering wild foods – and they have driven large-scale displacement from rural areas to towns. In urban areas, displaced women increasingly rely on wage labour, contributing to a significant shift away from traditional farming systems in South Sudan.

Hence, these changes require that displaced women are also included in the design and implementation of agricultural and livelihood policies. Women also have valuable experience and insights to assist frontline actors navigating conflict and economic transition and therefore informing policy processes.

Finally, it is notable that younger Agar Dinka women tend to express more optimism about new and emerging opportunities than do older women. This positivity may simply reflect a survival strategy, as many younger women have little choice but to adapt their lives and livelihoods – as remaining in cattle camps or conflict-affected border areas is simply not viable.

For those leaving rural life, access to education becomes a crucial gateway to alternative futures. Tertiary education, in particular, can open doors to permanent, salaried employment – opportunities that are often beyond reach for those who drop out of school at earlier stages. However, for the many who are unable to complete their education, life in towns typically offers poorly defined and precarious roles, often with increased risks and limited protection. These realities again highlight the importance of policies that support young women's education, skills development and safe transition into employment.

Understanding the unique pressures and stark choices faced by younger women is essential to designing responsive programmes that offer viable, dignified pathways forward – especially for those navigating the uncertainties of displacement, urbanisation and social change.

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About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance, and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods, are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

SPARC aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the FCDO, donors, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments, and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

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