



SPARC

Supporting Pastoralism
and Agriculture in Recurrent
and Protracted Crises

ISSN 2977-9669

December 2025

TECHNICAL REPORT
**WOMEN'S EVOLVING
LIVELIHOODS AND SHIFTING
GENDER NORMS IN WESTERN
BAHR EL GHAZAL STATE,
SOUTH SUDAN**

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How to cite: Bedelian, C., Njoroge, G. and Gathuo, N.M. (2025) *Women's evolving livelihoods and shifting gender norms in Western Bahr el Ghazal State, South Sudan*. Technical Report. London: SPARC Knowledge (<https://doi.org/10.61755/WJTC6283>).

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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.

Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (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 UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), donors, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments, and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

Acknowledgements

This technical report is published through the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) programme, which is supported by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

We are sincerely grateful to the many South Sudanese respondents who generously shared their time and experiences with us during the fieldwork. Special thanks to Juwa Ambrose, Ohide Johnson and Michael Koor Mayom for their tireless support and teamwork in carrying out the interviews. Also, many thanks to Elizabeth Daley (Gender Equity and Social Inclusion Advisor, SPARC) and Ramona Ridolfi, Gender and Social Inclusion expert for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of the report, and Carmen Jaquez (Mercy Corps) for signing off on this report.

We would like to thank Julie Grady Thomas for managing the publication process, Ruby Cowling for copyediting and proofreading and Valerie Geiger for typesetting this report.

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ACRONYMS

FGD focus group discussion

NGO non-governmental organisation

VSLA Village Savings and Loans Association

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines women's adaptive livelihood strategies, or bricolage, in Western Bahr el Ghazal State, South Sudan, amidst a context of protracted conflict, climate shocks, and economic instability. It explores how women creatively combine multiple small-scale income-generating activities to sustain their household's well-being, while navigating shifting gender dynamics and challenging sociocultural norms. The research draws on 30 in-depth interviews with women and men, 14 key informant interviews, and seven focus group discussions conducted in March 2025 across rural and peri-urban communities in Wau and Jur River counties.

Context of livelihood change

South Sudan's rural livelihoods are undergoing rapid and complex transitions driven by decades of civil conflict, displacement, recurrent droughts and floods, and economic instability. Traditional pastoral and farming systems have been disrupted, with households adapting by diversifying livelihood portfolios. Livestock and crop farming remain important for food security and cultural identity, but cash needs for essentials such as food purchases, school fees, and medical expenses have risen, requiring income generation through multiple strategies. As male livelihood roles are impacted by migration, conflict, and economic hardship, women increasingly assume broader responsibilities in both household management and income generation.

Livelihood bricolage: women's adaptive strategies

Women in Wau and Jur River counties are engaged in livelihood bricolage – a concept describing the resourceful and creative assembly of diverse, usually informal, income-generating activities using resources 'at hand' or locally available (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). These activities include crop cultivation, livestock rearing, market and petty trade, tailoring, embroidery, brewing and selling tea and local alcohol, firewood and grass collection, charcoal burning, and casual wage labour. Women often manage several activities concurrently or seasonally, smoothing income fluctuations and mitigating shocks.

Women's livelihood bricolage is driven both by immediate necessity and longer-term strategic risk management. Core motivations include meeting essential household expenses such as food, school fees, healthcare, and emergencies, requiring income from diversified sources. Additionally, livelihood diversification provides a buffer against shocks like crop failure, price volatility, theft, or ongoing conflict, enhancing household resilience.

While bricolage demonstrates women's agency and resilience, it also imposes a 'triple burden' (Malou, 2024): unpaid domestic and care work, subsistence food production, and paid income-generating activities. Many of these tasks, especially charcoal burning and natural resource harvesting, are physically demanding and increase women's workloads considerably.

Enablers of women's adaptation

Women's capacity to effectively practise livelihood bricolage is supported by several factors. Strong social capital, derived from family ties and wider social networks, underpins mutual assistance in labour, emotional support, business mentorship, and informal credit access. Peer support groups, such as Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), provide financial resources alongside social encouragement and collective problem-solving. Within households, supportive members – especially husbands – further enhance women's adaptive strategies by contributing start-up capital, sharing domestic duties, and promoting collaborative decision-making. Additionally, access to vocational training opportunities and women's personal strengths like self-confidence, determination and belief in their capabilities enable women to innovate and sustain their livelihoods.

Conversely, women face constraints from limited access to land, capital, and markets, as well as physical labour demands; security threats; restrictive gender norms, and infrastructural deficits such as inadequate transportation and education access.

Shifting gender roles and household dynamics

The evolving livelihood landscape is reshaping gender relations within households and communities. Women's increased economic contributions are leading to greater influence over daily financial decisions and more visible roles as primary providers in the household and leaders in community savings groups and local institutions. Some men are beginning to share domestic responsibilities such as childcare, especially when women's workload peaks.

However, resistance to women's expanded roles persists alongside growing acceptance, with stigma, jealousy, and social tensions evident. Although women's leadership is increasing, it often remains limited in practical authority, with ongoing challenges to balancing traditional domestic expectations alongside public roles. Younger generations tend to be more supportive of gender equality, and widows or female-headed households often serve as pioneers of new economic and leadership roles. Despite these advances, patriarchal norms and unequal power relations remain entrenched, restricting women's control over key assets such as land and livestock.



Women use resources like village savings and lending (VSLA) initiatives to diversify and manage their livelihoods. South Sudan, 2014. Image: S. Hamsik

Recommendations

The findings highlight the necessity of recognising and reinforcing women's bricolage as a central pillar of resilience and empowerment, rather than imposing rigid livelihood models that may fail to capture local realities. Key recommendations include:

- Support women's livelihood bricolage and diverse adaptive strategies by offering relevant and practical skills training, access to tools, and better market opportunities.
- Strengthen social capital through collective approaches such as savings groups, cooperatives, and peer-to-peer learning networks.
- Invest in essential infrastructure and basic services, including healthcare, education, transport, and childcare, to reduce women's workloads and enable more equitable participation.
- Promote legal and policy reforms to enhance 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 gender norms and promotes shared household decision-making and women's leadership.
- Engage men as partners in gender equality efforts to transform social relations and support to women's empowerment.



South Sudan has transitioned from a barter to a cash-based economy in the last 20 years. Women seek out livelihoods that provide cash income. South Sudan, 2017. © J. Huxta

1 INTRODUCTION

Rural livelihoods in South Sudan are undergoing rapid changes driven by a complex interplay of climate shocks, protracted conflict and economic instability (Humphrey et al., 2023). Decades of violence and displacement, coupled with recurrent droughts, floods, and sharp economic fluctuations have left traditional livelihood systems in a state of flux. While these challenges create much uncertainty, they are also bringing about adaptive and opportunistic responses within communities.

In Western Bahr el Ghazal State, households continue to raise livestock, which remain central to wealth, food security, and social status. At the same time, crop cultivation for subsistence and increasingly for sale is a vital complementary activity. This diversification reflects a gradual shift towards greater engagement with market economies. As household cash needs increase to purchase essential goods, such as staple foods, salt, sugar and clothing, and to access services like healthcare and education, reliance on generating cash income has grown. Many families now produce food for sale, engage in wage labour, and take up other small businesses.

This evolving livelihood landscape is accompanied by a shifting division of labour between men and women (Malou, 2024). As cash needs rise, women increasingly take on roles in small businesses and wage labour to supplement family income, alongside participating with men in farming activities for food production and sales. This change is further influenced by the impacts of conflict, climate and economic shocks, which often lead men to migrate to towns for employment, get involved in armed conflict or go into military service, resulting in their prolonged absence from the household.

These dynamics have important implications for gender roles and workloads. Women, traditionally excluded from formal employment and largely confined to unpaid domestic and subsistence work, are now engaging increasingly in paid labour outside the household. This shift has been described as a 'triple burden' situation (Malou, 2024) where women simultaneously: (1) produce food at home for family consumption; (2) provide unpaid caregiving and domestic labour; and (3) engage in cash income-generating activities beyond the household. These expanded workloads reflect the evolving nature of gender roles, shaped by agrarian transitions in rural settings that are closely linked to urban market dynamics (ibid.).

Within this context, women are increasingly reshaping their roles and contributions within households and communities. They adopt diverse, often informal livelihood strategies, combining livestock, farming, market trade, small business activities, natural resource extraction, and other income sources in a process of bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1966) that demonstrates creativity, resilience, and agency.

2 BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

This research builds upon the findings from a previous SPARC study in Western Bahr el Ghazal State, South Sudan that identified the ways in which livelihoods are adapting amid ongoing crises (Njoroge and Gathuoy, 2025). That study highlighted how women's roles within households are transforming, noting that many women no longer simply follow traditionally gendered livelihood pathways but instead pursue novel and diversified strategies. Yet the social, cultural, and structural factors enabling or constraining these shifts remain underexplored, as do women's own aspirations and the implications for gender norms within households and communities. This new study sought to fill those gaps.

2.1 Study objectives

The study has the following objectives:

- to understand how and why women in crisis-affected pastoralist and farming communities diversify and adapt their livelihoods, particularly through bricolage – the creative combining of multiple income-generating activities
- to identify the key enablers and barriers influencing the success of these adaptation strategies
- to examine the impact of women's livelihood adaptations on gender norms and dynamics around household decision-making, recognising that gender norms also shape adaptation choices in a two-way interdependent process
- to explore how these insights can inform humanitarian and development programming, enhancing support for women's resilience and empowerment.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was conducted in March 2025 across 10 locations – five rural villages and five peri-urban settlements – in Wau and Jur River counties in Western Bahr el Ghazal State. These sites were selected to capture pastoral and farming communities in a range of contexts affected by ongoing conflict, environmental shocks, and market instability.

Wau County is home to many of South Sudan's ethnic groups, including the Dinka, who are predominantly pastoralists, though they also practise farming. In contrast, Jur River County is largely made up of farming communities, such as the Luo, whose main livelihood is crop cultivation, supplemented by small-scale livestock keeping.

The research team included male and female South Sudanese researchers familiar with the research area and fluent in local dialects, ensuring culturally sensitive engagement and effective communication with participants. Prior to fieldwork, permissions were obtained from local authorities, village chiefs, and security offices. Research participants were randomly selected on-site to minimise bias and maximise diverse representation across age groups and social roles. Data collection involved three main methods:

- In-depth interviews: 30 individuals (18 women, 12 men) were interviewed to explore personal experiences of livelihood adaptation, gender roles, household decision-making, and support networks.
- Key informant interviews: 14 interviews with local leaders, church officials, NGO staff, and vocational trainers were conducted in Wau town or various research locations, offering insights into the broader structural and institutional influences shaping livelihoods and gender relations.
- Focus group discussions (FGDs): seven gender-segregated FGDs – four with women and three with men – involved 67 participants in collective discussions on community norms, challenges, and livelihood strategies.

All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with informed consent, translated into English and transcribed. Each transcript was read in full to identify key themes and patterns. Thematic analysis using NVivo software was then used to systematically explore key patterns related to livelihood changes, evolving gender norms, decision-making processes, and social and economic support mechanisms.

3.1 Ethical considerations and limitations

Given the sensitive sociopolitical context and personal nature of some topics, participants were informed of their right to decline to answer any question or to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly preserved during data collection and reporting by assigning codes instead of using real names, and by conducting interviews away from others to protect participants' privacy. Due to security concerns, research was conducted in accessible areas, potentially limiting the representativeness of findings. As a result, the conclusions are context-specific and may not be fully generalisable to other regions of South Sudan or similar settings.

4 LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Gender and bricolage in agricultural livelihood systems

Agricultural livelihoods in Africa are deeply embedded in social norms and gender roles that influence access to land, labour, markets, and decision-making power (Vincent, 2022). In many dryland contexts, including South Sudan, women's economic contributions are often overlooked, informal, and constrained by cultural expectations. Historically, gender norms have limited women's ownership and access of assets such as land and livestock, restricted their cash income-generating opportunities, and excluded them from formal decision-making processes around land and natural resource governance.

Traditionally, men managed livestock, made key financial decisions, and engaged in trade, while women primarily provided unpaid labour related to subsistence farming, caregiving, and food preparation. However, ongoing crises in South Sudan, including persistent conflict, recurrent droughts, and recent flooding, have disrupted these established divisions of labour (Humphrey et al., 2023; Njoroge and Gathuoy, 2025).

Such shocks tend to exacerbate existing inequalities by disproportionately burdening women and limiting their access to resources. At the same time, shocks can disrupt rigid social and economic roles, opening opportunities for adaptation and the redefinition of livelihoods. In South Sudan's drylands, men often migrate with their livestock or seek work elsewhere, step back from traditional roles due to economic pressures, or join the military. As a result, women frequently take on expanded informal economic roles alongside their existing workloads (Humphrey et al., 2023; Njoroge and Gathuoy, 2025).

4.2 Bricolage as a lens for understanding adaptation in resource-constrained environments

This dynamic shift in gender roles can be understood through the concept of bricolage, originally introduced in 1966 by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss as the creative use of 'whatever is at hand' to solve problems. In entrepreneurial and development literature, bricolage describes how individuals innovate under resource constraints by recombining available assets, skills, and relationships (Baker and Nelson, 2005). In the context of South Sudan, women's bricolage manifests in blending multiple livelihood activities such as tea selling, embroidery, charcoal production, tailoring, and seasonal farming, often concurrently, to navigate a resource-scarce and crisis-affected environment (Njoroge and Gathuoy, 2025).

Bricolage challenges traditional entrepreneurial paradigms by emphasising resourcefulness rather than resource acquisition. Entrepreneurs engaging in bricolage shift their mindset from focusing on what they need to what they already possess, fostering improvisation and innovation even in constrained settings (Mateus and Sarkar, 2024). Resource constraints, rather than limiting action, often act as catalysts that spark necessity-driven entrepreneurship. Women rely on their existing skills, social networks, and natural resources to generate income and sustain their livelihoods (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Linna, 2013).

Research identifies three core elements of bricolage: a social mindset grounded in resourcefulness; 'making do' with whatever resources are available; and improvisation as a method of proceeding (Linna, 2013). Key personality traits like passion, persistence, and determination also underpin women's adaptive strategies in such uncertain environments (ibid.).

Bricolage in these contexts is often dynamic and seasonal, with women combining activities at different times of the year to smooth income flows and enhance food security. Moreover, bricolage tends to emerge strongly where formal institutions, regulatory support, and governance structures are weak or absent (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Mair and Martí, 2009). Resource scarcity and institutional voids create the space for bricolage, which in turn facilitates new forms of participation in markets and broader society among groups previously excluded, particularly women (Mair and Martí, 2009).

Women in South Sudan are frequently excluded from formal economies and governance, making informal, adaptive, and improvisational strategies essential to their economic survival and empowerment. Across Africa in general, female entrepreneurs face sociocultural constraints, such as difficulties accessing finance and exclusion from business networks, that intensify gender disparities (Naguib, 2022). Despite these barriers, women's bricolage strategies are often embedded in informal social structures, relying heavily on kinship ties, reciprocal exchanges, and community relationships (Baker et al., 2003). Networking bricolage, where entrepreneurs leverage their social networks to access critical resources, is a key feature of successful livelihood innovation (ibid.).

4.3 Implications for this study

Using bricolage as an analytical lens helps reinterpret women's livelihood strategies not as marginal or improvised responses, but as deliberate, adaptive practices shaped by specific constraints and opportunities. This approach highlights the importance of supporting these existing creative strategies while also addressing the structural barriers such as limited access to land, credit, and markets. Additionally, considering who controls the income and resources generated through these diverse livelihoods is important, as such control plays a key role in determining whether women can move beyond coping strategies toward enhanced agency and autonomy within their households and communities.

Livestock are central to livelihoods but have sharply declined, largely due to protracted conflict. Western Bahr el Ghazal State, South Sudan, 2025. Image: Claire Bedelian



5 WOMEN'S ADAPTATION AND BRICOLAGE STRATEGIES

In response to overlapping crises, women in South Sudan are actively redefining their livelihoods to ensure household survival and well-being. This section synthesises field evidence to show how women's strategic bricolage of livelihoods dynamically reshapes their economic participation and social relations.

5.1 Changing household roles and economic responsibilities

Traditional household roles and economic responsibilities in Western Bahr el Ghazal State are undergoing considerable change, driven by recurrent and overlapping crises such as conflict, climate shocks and economic instability. Historically, men were the primary providers while women managed reproductive tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, with cultural taboos reinforcing this division of labour. However, these crises have disrupted livelihoods and forced households to adapt, gradually reshaping established roles and responsibilities. These shifts are particularly pronounced in conflict-affected and displaced communities, where traditional labour divisions have weakened considerably, and women are taking up ever greater workloads (Malou, 2024).

As economic pressures intensify and cash economies expand, families are compelled to diversify livelihood strategies, leading to greater involvement of women in income-generating activities that were traditionally dominated by men. At the same time, men's contributions to household livelihoods have become increasingly constrained. Factors including migration with livestock or the seeking of employment opportunities elsewhere; prolonged salary delays especially for government workers such as teachers and soldiers; trauma, injury and death from conflict; alcoholism; and the complexity of polygamous family structures have limited men's abilities to consistently support their families. Others may engage in specific activities like charcoal burning or farming but do not reliably contribute to household needs.

In response, women have adapted by taking on expanded economic roles alongside their existing domestic duties. They have increasingly become the primary providers, especially in cases of widowhood, abandonment, or unreliable male support. Women now undertake tasks historically considered male domains, such as charcoal burning and pole collection, reflecting their expanded role in household provision. There is a widespread perception that women are now principally responsible for family sustenance, while men's accountability for family welfare has diminished.

5.2 Assembling livelihoods from available resources

Every woman interviewed reported engaging in farming, cultivating staple crops such as sorghum, groundnuts, simsim, cassava, okra, and pumpkins. Some also managed livestock (goats, cows, and chickens) although many households had experienced losses due to conflict, theft, or disease.

Common across accounts was the practice of livelihood bricolage: creatively assembling a portfolio of diverse, small-scale, often informal activities ranging from brewing tea and local alcohol, selling cooked and uncooked foods, and making charcoal and cutting poles, to tailoring, embroidery, grass cutting, and petty trade in local markets. To diversify income and mitigate risk, women often run multiple small businesses simultaneously. These include tea making, bread baking, operating kiosks, selling vegetables, peanut butter or biscuits, and brewing traditional drinks. Charcoal burning and grass cutting are particularly common income-generating activities among widows and poorer women, despite being labour-intensive and physically demanding.

5.3 Livelihood activities

Farming

Farming remains the primary and most consistently reported livelihood activity. Both women and men cultivate staple crops, mainly for home consumption to ensure food security, but increasingly also for sale to generate cash for school fees, household goods, healthcare, emergencies, or business reinvestment. As one woman reported, 'There is no other job, you eat from the farm, you pay school fees, anything you want you will get from farming.'

Decision-making about crop production tends to be shared within households, although in some families men advise or lead on what to plant and when to sell. Women are demonstrating growing agency in these decisions, especially widows or female heads of household, who often manage income independently or jointly with husbands.

In recent years, increased risks from flooding have affected crops more frequently and security threats sometimes restrict women's safe access to fields. In some locations, irrigated vegetable gardening during the dry season has emerged as a complementary activity, managed by both women and men.

Livestock production

Livestock production – the raising of goats, cows and chickens – remains an important livelihood activity, but has declined due to conflict, theft, and cattle raiding. Livestock provide essential products such as milk and meat for household consumption and serve as critical assets that can be sold to meet urgent cash needs including food and school fees. As one women interviewee from Tharkueng explained, 'When you know cows, they are everything, they help to give milk for the children, also help to get money and so on. When there is no food production due to insecurity, you can sell one and it helps for the whole year.'

Women usually take primary responsibility for the day-to-day care and health management of goats and chickens, while cattle management usually remains under men. Control over income from livestock sales varies: many women manage small sales independently, though major decisions are often joint or male-led. Widows and female-headed households tend to have greater autonomy and control.

Conflict-driven livestock losses and ongoing insecurity have severely limited herd rebuilding. In Wau County, decades of protracted conflict have made livestock ownership risky, causing many households to deprioritise herd maintenance. Women sometimes face the difficult decision to sell livestock early, either to avoid theft or loss from disease, highlighting the tension between addressing immediate needs and preserving long-term assets.



Many women earn modest regular income from brewing and selling tea to support household needs. Western Bahr el Ghazal State, South Sudan, 2025. Image: Grace Njoroge

A woman from Marial Bai described this dilemma: 'It's because of the conflict and I was the one who decided that instead of keeping those, people might come and steal again. And even if the thieves don't come, still they might die of sickness because others died before, so it was better to sell them all.'

Natural resource harvesting

Natural resource harvesting such as cutting and selling poles and grass, charcoal burning, and firewood collection, is another vital income source – especially during dry seasons. Though important for school fees, food, and business reinvestment, this work is labour-intensive, physically demanding, and constrained by environmental degradation and resource scarcity. In most cases, women physically do this work themselves; they may hire men, but low profits make hiring costly. Women typically manage incomes from these activities independently or negotiate control with husbands.

Small business and market trading

Small business and market trading are central features of women's livelihoods, complementing farm and livestock activities. Women run tea shops, restaurants, bakeries and kiosks, and sell food items like bread, tea, cakes, peanuts, groundnut paste, and local beer. Activities such as breadmaking, tailoring, and embroidery often require training, sometimes provided by NGOs or family members. These businesses provide flexible income streams essential for meeting daily household needs, especially when farming yields are poor. Income generated from these small enterprises was described as a way to 'protect' money from farming or livestock, preserving those assets for other purposes.

Women primarily allocate business income towards essential household needs like food, children's education, healthcare, and reinvestment in their enterprises. These small-scale businesses often offer women greater control over their earnings. While some women, particularly widows, manage income independently, many households' financial decisions involve negotiation or joint decision-making with husbands.

Wage labour, such as casual farm work or market-related jobs, is generally physically demanding and time-intensive. It typically serves as a last resort or supplementary income source when women lack access to sufficient resources or land or have been displaced. Women tend to take wage labour decisions themselves, particularly when husbands are absent, unemployed, or unable to provide financially.

Savings and loan groups, such as Voluntary Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), pool small, regular contributions to provide loans or lump sums. These funds enable women to start or expand enterprises – including tea shops and vegetable gardening – and to invest in farming inputs and livestock. Beyond financial support, these groups offer social encouragement, collective problem solving, and confidence building. Women usually manage savings independently, though reinvestment decisions may involve spouses.

5.4 Diverse livelihoods: necessity, strategy and seasonality

Women's livelihood bricolage is motivated by both necessity and strategic risk management. A key motivation is the need to cover essential household expenses such as food, school fees, healthcare, and emergencies, requiring income from diverse sources. Diversification also buffers households against shocks such as crop failure, price fluctuations, theft, or conflict. Seasonal rhythms further shape activity choices: during the dry season, women often engage in activities such as charcoal burning, grass cutting, and firewood collection, while wetter months see an increase in farming and crop cultivation. By participating in activities with different seasonal peaks, women maintain more consistent income streams across the year. For example, one woman explained, 'We grow crops and keep animals, but also burn charcoal or fish to supplement. Sometimes I sell shisha too', showing how income is diversified to adapt to changing circumstances.

Changes in male participation also drive women's bricolage. Many men migrate, face extended periods of unpaid government work, or are affected by conflict and other pressures leading to irregular or absent financial support. Consequently, women take on roles and tasks historically assigned to men, driven by the immediate need to provide for schooling, healthcare, and food security. As one interviewee stated, 'Nowadays if you don't want to do some of the work done by men, your children won't go to school... you just do it... so that your children don't suffer the way you did.' Despite arising from necessity, these shifts also reflect women's growing agency and are gradually reshaping household dynamics and local economies. As one man highlighted, 'The daily income that we manage comes from the little things the wife does', reflecting women's central role during uncertain times.



Small irrigated vegetable gardens at home provide food for households and occasional income from sales. Western Bahr el Ghazal State, South Sudan, 2025. Image: Claire Bedelian

5.5 The ‘triple burden’: navigating care, production and income

Bricolage requires a willingness to cross traditional boundaries and places additional strain on women. They now carry the ‘triple burden’ of unpaid care, subsistence food production, and income generation through market and wage labour (Malou, 2024). While workloads increase, women’s economic agency expands as they juggle these roles to ensure family survival.

For example, during droughts, women may shift their activity portfolios from farming to non-farm activities like charcoal production and natural resource collection, relocating agricultural efforts to areas with available water. Economic disruptions further increase reliance on daily income-generating activities such as tea selling, market trade or livestock sales, often supported by savings groups. An illustrative case is ‘Mary’, a widow with four children, who embroiders bedsheets at night, brews tea during market hours, and collects grass to sell. She explained, ‘Each one doesn’t feed us, but together, they help us live.’ With no land and limited capital, Mary’s livelihood illustrates the essence of bricolage – using whatever resources are available to maintain household well-being.

5.6 Everyday resilience through ongoing adaptation

Women’s bricolage unfolds as a continuous, dynamic process of everyday resilience, extending beyond income generation to reshape how labour, production, and care are organised within domestic, communal, and market spaces. Despite challenges such as limited land access, scarce tools, and restricted mobility, women manage multiple responsibilities across diverse environments.

As a tea seller in Wau explained, ‘We do what we can with what we have. The men are not in the farms anymore. We are the ones trying to keep things alive.’ This illustrates bricolage as an ongoing, active process, and not merely a short-term coping mechanism. Through persistence and the practical use of available resources, women support household and community well-being amid overlapping crises. It represents an active, adaptive process grounded in women’s local knowledge and agency, demonstrating their skill in navigating complex social and economic systems characterised by intersecting constraints and opportunities.

5.7 Bricolage as a catalyst for social change

Bricolage can contribute to gradual social transformation by enabling women to actively manage household well-being through diverse, practical strategies. Rather than viewing women as passive victims of crisis, bricolage highlights their role as adaptive agents who draw on their skills, social ties and locally available resources to secure family well-being. This approach to everyday resilience is relational and collaborative, rooted in community networks, peer learning, and improvisation – elements often overlooked by governments, NGOs, and humanitarian programmes.

Bricolage can help bridge gaps where formal systems such as markets, service delivery, or aid are absent or insufficient. Women’s ability to adapt and innovate within their resource constraints sustains families and keep communities functioning during periods of uncertainty. Though often incremental and context-specific, these contributions support broader processes of social empowerment over time.

6 WHAT SUPPORTS WOMEN'S ADAPTATION AND BRICOLAGE?

Women's ability to adapt and assemble livelihoods through bricolage varies widely, as different women encounter distinct opportunities and barriers. Several enabling factors emerge as critical to supporting effective adaptation and resilience; however, a range of economic, environmental, social, physical, security and psychological barriers continue to restrict women's ability to diversify, thrive, or achieve success (see Box 1 for a discussion of perceptions of success).

Key economic challenges, such as inflation, market competition and limited capital, severely limit women's ability to start, sustain, or expand businesses and agricultural activities. Environmental shocks, such as floods, droughts and pests, frequently damage crops and reduce livestock productivity, forcing households to adjust their livelihood strategies.

Social barriers also significantly restrict women's economic participation. Restrictive gender norms not only contribute to levels of community stigma, jealousy, and resistance that limit women's participation in certain economic activities or leadership positions, but also introduce psychological barriers – such as internalised beliefs about appropriate gender roles – that reduce women's confidence and willingness to pursue new opportunities.

Physical constraints, such as long distances to markets, inadequate transportation, and the physically demanding nature of many livelihood activities, increase women's labour burden and reduce their economic returns. Security threats, such as theft, ongoing conflict, and displacement, further disrupt livelihoods and create persistent uncertainty, with women disproportionately vulnerable to such risks.

Together, these overlapping challenges shape the complex environment in which women navigate bricolage, influencing how effectively they can adapt and sustain their households over time.

PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS AND WELL-BEING

For many women, success is measured by their ability to meet immediate family needs – feeding their children, paying school fees, managing emergencies, and maintaining household dignity. Enhancing household food security and securing funds during lean periods, especially for school expenses, are key markers of this success.

Beyond material provision, though, women express pride and a sense of personal achievement in gaining economic independence and increased control over financial decisions. As one woman reflected, 'I no longer feel like a burden in the home. I feel respected', highlighting the empowerment that comes from earning and managing their own income.



Women share livelihood workloads to balance new responsibilities with traditional household responsibilities. South Sudan, 2023. Image: E. Ahonobadha

6.1 Key enablers for adaptation and bricolage

Social networks and peer support

Social networks play a fundamental role in providing support for many women. Family remains the primary source of labour and assistance, with women sharing food, cash, domestic chores, moral support, and advice within extended kinship networks. These reciprocal exchanges are deeply rooted in South Sudan, where relatives often share land, shelter, livestock, and harvests according to long-established gender roles and social obligations (Malou, 2024).

Beyond immediate family ties, broader community networks based on female solidarity offer important resources such as food, small loans, and emotional support. Women commonly share goods like salt, oil, and flour, provide advice and business mentorship, and extend neighbourly care during illness, especially in the absence of health facilities. Market shops largely owned by women extend small credits to one another. Though conflict and strained inter-ethnic relations have weakened overall community cohesion in many areas, women's networks remain vital and often more dependable than sporadic or absent government and NGO assistance.

These social networks are especially critical during times of conflict and displacement. Women's testimonies highlight how these connections sustain households in the absence of men. As one woman explained, 'When my husband left during fighting, it was the women who helped me feed my children.' During emergencies, communities come together to share basic needs, strengthening bonds of mutual support.

Women's ability to assemble livelihoods through bricolage varies, with some women acting as pioneers who innovate new strategies that others observe and adopt. Learning from peers enables women to adapt these successful approaches, strengthening resilience and creativity within informal economies. This horizontal exchange of practical and emotional advice builds confidence, develops skills, and strengthens social networks that support mentoring, resource pooling, and collective labour – creating a supportive environment that encourages broader adoption of effective livelihood practices.

Importantly, these ongoing reciprocal relationships extend beyond the one-off assistance typical of formal aid, building sustainable systems of mutual guidance and practical help. One woman interviewee from Mboro exemplified this reciprocal spirit: 'I will give you advice, and we can work together. You might start by making bread, then when you are ready, you can help me the next day.'

However, community attitudes toward women's economic activities are not uniformly positive. Women often face jealousy, gossip, and social resistance from both men and women within their communities. Economic success can provoke suspicion or criticism, especially when women challenge traditional gender roles or achieve greater visibility as business owners and decision-makers. Such social tensions complicate women's livelihoods and underscore the importance of solidarity networks that provide a buffer against stigma and exclusion.

Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs)

VSLAs and women's groups play an important role in providing savings, loans, and wider social support. Beyond financial capital for emergencies and business needs, these groups offer emotional support, knowledge sharing, and opportunities for capacity building. Such groups strengthen members' confidence and encourage collective action, functioning as both economic and social safety nets.

For example, a displaced returnee skilled in tailoring joined a VSLA and used a loan to purchase a second-hand sewing machine. She emphasised, 'We don't wait for men or aid; we support each other', highlighting the importance of peer solidarity and self-reliance.

Proceeds distributed from savings groups often contribute to household expenses, with widows particularly dependent on these networks for financial security. However, some informal groups remain exclusive and limited to relatives or selected members, restricting broader access.

Supportive household dynamics

Women who receive encouragement and collaboration from their husbands, and in some cases brothers or sons, tended to view their livelihood activities more positively. Shared financial responsibilities, caregiving, and household planning can enhance overall resilience and contribute to gradual shifts in traditional gender roles.

Supportive husbands often play an important role by providing start-up capital, sharing domestic duties, offering business advice, and helping women navigate social challenges. Contrary to some common stereotypes, many men support women's participation and leadership, recognising the benefits for household well-being. For example, one woman petty trader from Wau shared, 'He told me, "You are now the one feeding this house. I will help with the children." That changed everything.'

The vast majority of men and women interviewed described such supportive dynamics and only few expressed traditional views or discouragement about women engaging in market activities. For example, an elder man in Nyin Akok discouraged his wife from working in the market, concerned it would distract their young children from education and expose the family to negative influences. He prevented her from running a tea or brewing business, believing her primary responsibility was managing the home.

More commonly, women and men noted that some husbands limit their wives' market participation due to concerns about infidelity or stigma around women working outside the home. In more conservative households, women's involvement in economic activities is often restricted or discouraged, limiting their opportunities beyond domestic roles.

However, these dynamics appear to be gradually shifting, especially among younger couples and those with greater access to education. Restrictive attitudes were relatively uncommon in this study. Increased acceptance of shared responsibility between men and women, where women's economic contributions are supported alongside men's roles, reflects evolving social norms and growing gender collaboration.

Personal initiative, mindset and self-efficacy

Resilience, determination, and a pragmatic mindset are important factors enabling many women to initiate and sustain changes in their livelihoods. Many women showed initiative, a willingness to learn, and the ability to adapt despite social and economic barriers. These qualities can influence whether livelihood activities progress or face difficulties.

In several cases, women take on activities traditionally assigned to men, motivated by the need to provide for their families even when facing societal disapproval. One woman engaged in charcoal production explained, 'I cut the trees myself. I am strong because I must feed the children.' This willingness to cross traditional boundaries allows women to pursue diverse opportunities and adjust activities according to seasonal or market demand.

Nonetheless, activities such as charcoal burning are physically demanding and labour-intensive, often yielding low returns relative to the effort required. A woman from Besselia expressed this reality, stating, 'If you don't work, where will you eat from?' While many women maintain a hopeful and resilient outlook, some expressed feelings of exhaustion and powerlessness: 'The work is hard, and even if I do it, the income is very little.' Social stigma adds another layer of demotivation.

Women's ability to successfully adapt is influenced by men's levels of comfort with, and support of, the change.
South Sudan, 2023. Image: E. Ahonobadha



Despite these difficulties, a strong sense of self-efficacy – the belief in their ability to achieve goals – helps some women remain motivated and persistent. This confidence, combined with relevant skills and knowledge, supports them in developing and sustaining their enterprises while managing evolving household and community responsibilities. Such psychological resilience plays an important role in sustaining efforts over time.

Previous research on bricolage describes this approach as ‘resourcefulness’ – the ability to make effective use of available resources to address pressing challenges (Linna, 2013; Di Domenico et al., 2010). Women combine detailed local knowledge with qualities such as persistence and practicality to navigate uncertain and resource-limited environments (Linna, 2013). Central to this is agency; rather than following fixed strategies, bricoleurs respond creatively to community needs by ‘making do’ with what is available and adapting solutions as circumstances change (Di Domenico et al., 2010).

Education

Education challenges long-time gender norms and broadens women’s access to economic opportunities. Women with education are generally better equipped to manage businesses, access NGO employment, and navigate complex tasks. Conversely, low literacy and education levels restrict women’s access to formal services and training, hindering business start-up and expansion.

Most women interviewed had little or no formal education, mostly attending early primary school at best. Conflict-related damage to educational infrastructure and barriers such as poverty and cultural attitudes have limited female enrolment and completion rates.

Vocational, skills and business training

Training opportunities for women are limited and unevenly distributed, but highly valued when accessible. Skills development in areas such as breadmaking, tailoring, hairdressing, and small business management provide important entry points for many women, with those who receive training often reporting increased confidence, expanded livelihood options, and higher cash incomes.

NGO-led programmes offering training in agriculture, business management, tailoring, and leadership are particularly beneficial when combined with practical support such as seeds, tools, or equipment. Vocational training centres provide courses in a range of trades, including carpentry, electrical work, welding, bakery, hospitality, and computer studies. However, participation remains uneven. Women in remote areas or with caregiving responsibilities often struggle to attend sessions due to lack of childcare, transport, or social permission. School fees also present a major barrier, leading many girls and young women to discontinue their education. Cultural stereotypes further limit women’s access to technical fields, concentrating female students in traditional, often lower-paying sectors.

Access to capital and assets

Access to financial capital and productive assets remains a key enabler but also a major limitation for many women. Informal savings, peer borrowing, and small NGO start-up kits support some enterprise formation, yet formal credit remains largely inaccessible, especially for women lacking spousal support.

Land access is typically mediated by male relatives, presenting particular challenges for widows and other vulnerable women seeking plots of cultivable or grazing land. Although some gradual changes are creating opportunities for women to lease or temporarily receive land from community leaders, conflict and displacement further complicate women's ability to secure land and reclaim family plots accessed through their husbands' families upon return.

Livestock ownership is highly unequal, with a few male individuals holding substantial herds while most women have limited or no ownership. For those women who do own livestock, these animals serve both as productive assets and financial buffers during crises.

Market access and input availability

Access to markets, transportation, and key inputs such as seeds, tools, and materials can influence how quickly and successfully women establish and grow enterprises. Market access varied considerably across the study locations. Some communities benefit from good road infrastructure and market connectivity that facilitates the procurement of inputs and the sale of produce. In contrast, other areas are more isolated with poor transportation and inadequate infrastructure, posing barriers to market participation.

Geographic isolation and high transportation costs are common challenges that constrain business growth and limit access to broader markets. Women in more remote areas said they encountered delays, higher expenses, and reduced profit margins because of these connectivity issues.

NGO and government support

Support from NGOs and government, such as training, input provision, equipment distribution and cash transfers, is valued but is often insufficient and unevenly distributed, and can sometimes be short-lived. Community-based approaches, such as group farming, demonstration plots, and collective action, were reported to show greater sustainability and inclusivity than individual targeting.

Legal and institutional reforms that enable women's leadership, land rights, and protection from gender-based violence create essential spaces for adaptation, though implementation remains uneven and requires strengthening.

6.2 Interaction between factors

In summary, although these factors interact and contribute to women's adaptive capacities, the enablers that stand out as particularly important are social networks, supportive household relationships, and personal initiative. They offer the social capital, emotional support, practical knowledge, and internal motivation that enable women to navigate constraints and sustain livelihood bricolage in challenging environments.

7 DISCUSSION: SHIFTING GENDER NORMS: REDEFINING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

7.1 Expanding women's influence and decision-making

Women's growing economic roles have strengthened their influence over household financial decisions, contributing to shifts in traditional gender dynamics. Although men often continue to hold decision-making authority over major assets such as land and livestock, women are increasingly gaining control over daily finances and routine household expenditures. This change reflects both women's increased economic contributions and the practical need to handle day-to-day expenses. As one woman noted, 'Times have changed... mothers have a say. Selling a big sack of groundnuts is a problem unless you have informed your wife.'

These changing household negotiation dynamics, with more frequent joint decision-making, allow women to build influence by demonstrating their reliability through successful business management. As women gain more authority over financial decisions at home, they are also becoming more visible and active in their communities, as business owners, breadwinners, and community leaders. Many actively participate in saving and loan groups, manage household finances, and even hold elected positions as sub-chiefs or community representatives.

Not all community members accept these shifting norms. Some women face criticism or social resistance for overstepping traditional boundaries, and some men resist relinquishing authority. Nevertheless, there is growing recognition that supporting women's empowerment can benefit families and communities as a whole.

At the same time, women continue to balance economic activities with traditional gender responsibilities. Some men express concern about women spending extended periods away from home – whether at markets or collecting natural resources – reflecting ongoing negotiation around gender expectations and domestic responsibilities.

7.2 Men's evolving roles

Some men have begun to take on domestic responsibilities, including childcare and, less frequently, cooking, particularly during peak economic periods for their wives or when their wife had recently given birth or was unwell. This was more common among men who were educated, appreciated their wives' economic contributions, and spoke of a sense of shared responsibility. There were also increasing instances of men supporting their wives' businesses and participating in shared decision-making.

However, traditional expectations of men as primary economic providers and women as caregivers remain prevalent. One woman from Wau reflected, 'There is a little sense of trying to share roles.... When the husband is tired, he can go and rest with the child while the

woman keeps working.’ That said, while progressive changes as described above are not yet widespread, they signal gradually evolving attitudes toward gendered divisions of labour.

7.3 Shifts in gender norms and social attitudes

Early marriage, restrictions on land ownership, limited mobility, and curtailed voice remain challenges for women, but are increasingly being contested. NGOs, legal reforms, and exposure to new ideas are driving changes in gender relations and domestic dynamics. Interviews with NGO programme staff confirm reductions in physical violence against women: ‘Beating women used to be the order of the day in Jur River County but it has completely reduced.... Everybody is trying to understand that having an issue with your wife doesn’t mean you have to beat her.’

Changing youth aspirations also reflect evolving gender norms. Young men and women advocate for equal educational access and more flexible economic opportunities regardless of gender. One young respondent observed, ‘Previously, boys were taken to school and girls were married off.... Now, if you have a daughter, you allow her to go for education.’

7.4 Generational differences related to norm changes

Attitudes towards gender roles and changing norms vary across generations. Younger men and women tend to be more open to shared decision-making and gender equality, whereas older generations often hold more conservative views based on cultural or religious traditions. Widows, single mothers and returnees often act as early adopters of new gender roles, and typically exhibit greater autonomy in economic and social decisions.

Yet these changes are neither universal nor uncontested, and some women experience resentment or lack of recognition from male relatives when asserting economic agency. For example, the experience of ‘Rebecca’ shows how persistence can gradually alter household dynamics: initially discouraged by her husband, she continued her charcoal business, and when her income helped cover school fees and household needs, her husband’s attitude changed. ‘Now he listens to me. We sit together to plan. That never happened before.’ Similarly, ‘Charles’ recognises and supports his wife’s economic roles, saying, ‘She is the one who controls the money. I can’t control that money because that’s her business and she supports the children with it.’

Men also play a key role in shaping changing norms by educating boys and girls about gender equality. In Bussere, one husband highlighted that even without formal education, men can support progress by transmitting these values within the family, considering this approach to be as important as NGO-led awareness campaigns aimed at empowering women to have a stronger voice in their households and communities.

7.5 Women’s leadership and aspirations

Women are increasingly taking on leadership positions in both women-only and mixed-gender spaces, including charring savings groups and market committees, and assuming traditional roles such as sub-chiefs, which have historically been male-dominated. One woman said, ‘I am now the chairlady of our group. Before, no woman was even allowed to speak during meetings.’

Male community leaders have also acknowledged this trend. A male leader from Marial Bai noted, 'Women are now leaders. We encourage them to be leaders. Some are representatives, some are chiefs.'

Despite this progress, women leaders often encounter limitations in terms of the real power and resources they hold, with roles at times being more symbolic than practical. This dynamic is partly influenced by donor and NGO-driven policies that encourage women's participation, sometimes through quotas, which can contribute to perceptions of tokenism. Many women express a desire for more meaningful leadership opportunities and ongoing community engagement that addresses their specific concerns.

A tension persists between evolving and traditional gender expectations. While many community members welcome women's leadership, others continue to view leadership as primarily a male domain and expect women to balance leadership with traditional domestic responsibilities. A woman from Kangi shared that 'My husband says women can lead if they have respect and don't neglect home duties.' Cultural norms also influence women's leadership roles, such as the belief that women should have several children to gain influence among peers.

Although some men remain sceptical of women's leadership, many women highly rate women's ability to speak and decide in community affairs. There is broad optimism among women about their increased participation and leadership, often supported by men involved in decision-making processes. Women actively seek further skills training and capacity building, signalling gradual shifts in gender dynamics around leadership.

7.6 Bricolage and evolving gender norms

Gender roles are evolving through bricolage, where women's expanding participation and leadership reshape long-standing gender contracts. Traditional boundaries between 'men's work' and 'women's work' are increasingly blurred as women assert greater roles as earners and decision-makers, and men adjust by ceding some authority within households and communities. These new, more collaborative gender relationships are emerging in an ongoing context of persistent patriarchal norms and resistance, making the process complex and often contested.

These shifts in gender norms both influence and are influenced by livelihood bricolage. As women take on broader economic activities and leadership roles, household decision-making becomes more inclusive, and community attitudes gradually adapt to acknowledge women's contributions. Yet bricolage also reveals enduring vulnerabilities: gaps in market access, social protection, and basic services place heavy demands on women. They often bear increased labour burdens across productive, reproductive and community responsibilities. This uneven distribution of work increases their risk of exhaustion and economic insecurity, especially if informal networks weaken or livelihood efforts face setbacks.

In this ongoing process, women's adaptive strategies demonstrate both resilience and the need for supportive environments that recognise their expanded roles while addressing continuing challenges and inequalities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The growing practice of combining diversified economic activities alongside livestock and crop production reflects households' adaptive strategies to navigate shifting environmental, economic and social realities. This complementary approach offers a pathway to improved resilience and economic inclusion, particularly for women who have historically been marginalised in livestock ownership and decision-making.

For international humanitarian and development actors, these findings highlight the importance of supporting integrated pastoralist and farming systems rather than promoting livelihood shifts that risk undermining existing assets. Understanding the complexity of livelihood bricolage and the related emerging shifts in gender norms is essential for designing effective and inclusive programming. Key recommendations include:

Support and build on women's bricolage

Humanitarian and development initiatives should recognise, respect and reinforce women's adaptive, everyday strategies, rather than replace them with rigid, top-down interventions. Women's bricolage is central to household and community resilience, particularly in South Sudan's pastoralist and farming systems, where flexible and creative use of available resources sustains livelihoods.

Prioritise skills development, access to tools, and markets

Beyond providing immediate aid, interventions should focus on vocational and business training, access to essential tools, and facilitated market linkages. Women have emphasised the need for expanded educational and practical skills opportunities. Providing these support measures enhances women's ability to innovate and navigate economic challenges, reinforcing the resilience gained through bricolage.

Strengthen social capital through collective models

Supporting group-based, flexible and context-specific approaches, such as VSLAs, cooperatives, and peer-to-peer training, can enhance social capital, accountability, and sustainability. These collective models encourage community cohesion and resource sharing and are often more effective than individual handouts or one-size-fits-all solutions.

Improve infrastructure and basic services

Communities prioritised better healthcare, education, transportation (e.g. bicycles and motorcycles), and support for group activities and training. Investing in these areas strengthens women's, as well as men's, participation in livelihoods and increases the effectiveness of other interventions.

Sustain legal and policy reforms

Continued efforts by government are needed to implement and enforce laws and policies that protect and empower women, especially in areas such as land ownership, leadership roles, and prevention of gender-based violence.

Address structural barriers to women's economic participation

Constraints like limited access to inputs, capital, and markets restrict women's opportunities. Development programmes should also expand access to education, healthcare, water, and infrastructure to reduce daily burdens and support more resilient livelihoods. Addressing labour burdens through childcare support and labour-saving technologies can help sustain women's engagement.

Commit to long-term, gender-transformative programming

Supporting adaptive capacity and gradual shifts in social and gender norms requires patient, long-term engagement. Effective programming promotes gender transformative approaches that intentionally challenge restrictive gender norms by promoting women's leadership, shared decision-making, and the meaningful participation of both women and men. Such programming includes participatory interventions and social dialogue that creates safe spaces for women and men to critically reflect on gender roles, discuss barriers to empowerment, and collaboratively explore pathways to overcome resistance.

Engage men as partners

Shifting harmful gender norms requires involving men and boys in gender programming. Collaborative approaches that address root causes of discrimination, and demonstrate their negative implications for household livelihoods in the current fragile context, can reduce resistance and create more equitable household and community relationships.

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Cover image: Women practise livelihood bricolage, piecing together diverse informal work to support their households. South Sudan, 2023.
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Funded by



This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.