

STRUCTURED SUMMARY

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

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Motivation

Rural livelihoods in Western Bahr el Ghazal State, South Sudan, face challenges from protracted conflict, climate shocks and economic instability. Because men migrate for work, or are recruited for combat, they often cannot provide for their households, leaving women to take on more responsibilities both at home and in income generation. Understanding is limited of how women's livelihoods are changing, and of the factors influencing their adaptation. Addressing this gap is key when designing interventions that support women.

Purpose

We investigated how women in crisis-affected pastoralist and farming communities diversify and adapt their livelihoods through bricolage – the creative combination of various small-scale income-earning activities. We aimed 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 to enhance women's resilience and empowerment.

Approach and methods

Qualitative research was conducted in March 2025 in rural and peri-urban locations in Wau and Jur River counties, including 30 in-depth interviews with women and men, 14 key informant interviews (KIIs) with local leaders, church officials, non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff and vocational trainers, and seven gender-segregated focus group discussions (FGDs). Interviews and group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed, with each transcript reviewed to identify key themes. Thematic analysis was used to describe the observed livelihood strategies, gender dynamics and social support systems.

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.

- The need to cover essential household expenses and manage risks of shocks drive the changes seen. Although women's workloads have increased, the strategy also reflects their agency, resilience and innovation.
- Women's economic contributions strengthen their influence over household decisions and community leadership, despite gender norms that traditionally have limited women's agency.
- Key enablers include vibrant social networks, village savings and loan associations (VSLAs), supportive spouses, self-confidence and vocational training.
- The shift in gender roles has been gradual, with younger women and men more supportive of gender equality and expanded women's leadership.

Policy implications

- Support women's livelihood bricolage and adaptation through practical vocational and business training, access to tools and productive assets, and improved market linkages.
- Strengthen social capital through promotion of 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 their equitable participation.
- Promote legal reforms to secure women's land and leadership rights. Ensure protection against gender-based violence.
- Reduce obstacles to women's enterprises by expanding access to credit, productive inputs and tools or technologies that reduce labour burdens.
- Promote 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.

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