

BRIEFING | APRIL 2023

Conflict, gender-based violence and mental health in Lakes State Perspectives from South Sudan

Lakes State

Lakes State is one of the states making up the Wunlit Triangle cluster in South Sudan. It has an area of 43,595 km² and comprises eight counties – Rumbek East, Rumbek Centre, Rumbek North, Cueibet, Wulu, Yirol East, Yirol West and Awerial. The state capital, and its largest town, is Rumbek.

After the December 2013 and July 2016 conflicts in South Sudan, subnational violent conflicts have remained a constant in the lives of many communities across the country. In the Wunlit Triangle, women, girls, boys and men alike have had to endure cattle raiding and revenge killings, and tribal conflicts between the Dinka and Nuer, as well as Dinka–Dinka intra-communal violence, is ever-present. These have all had mental and psychosocial impacts for people in Lakes and its neighbouring states, particularly for women and girls. This briefing draws on the perspective of citizens and authorities to outline some of the key conflict, gender-based and mental health issues they face.

Women, children and elderly people were perceived to have been spared in past conflicts, but in recent years armed youths have acted more indiscriminately – worsening the suffering of the most vulnerable groups in the community and driving cycles of communal violence. Cattle raiding, revenge killings and the spread of small arms and light weapons all generate conflicts affecting women and girls.

A lack of socio-economic opportunities makes people vulnerable to conflict (and may make them more likely to perpetrate violence); for women and girls this is compounded by deeply rooted patriarchal norms. Women and young people continue to be marginalised, underrepresented and undervalued in key decision-making processes at community and government levels, where entrenched gender discrimination and inequalities lead to low participation.

This briefing draws attention to some of the peace, conflict, gender-based violence and mental health challenges that women experience, as identified in a two-day inter-county dialogue conducted in Rumbek on 16–17 November 2022. Saferworld and the Women Initiative for Development Organisation (WIDO) organised the dialogue, which brought together various county and state officials. These included the State Minister of Gender, Child and Social Development, the Director-General of the Ministry of Peacebuilding, county executive directors for Cueibet, Rumbek Centre and Rumbek North Counties, as well as representatives of traditional authorities and civil society.

This policy briefing reflects the views of participants and may not represent those of Saferworld and WIDO.

Peace, security and gender-based violence concerns raised during the dialogue:

1. Cattle raiding

Participants cited cattle raiding and theft within Lakes and between Lakes and neighbouring Unity and Warrap States as one of the core conflict drivers in the state. Cultural norms that equate owning more cows to ‘manhood’, wealth and strength are a significant driver of violent cattle raiding, which often results in the deaths of women, children and elderly people. Participants stressed that frequent cattle rustling carried out by armed youths from neighbouring Tonj East County on Rumbek North and Cueibet Counties has led to people being displaced from their homes. Cattle-related violence recently erupted between the Pakam of Rumbek North and the Luac of Tonj East – homes were burnt and properties destroyed, leaving many people homeless and hungry.

With communities turning to violence in defence of their cattle, and with the attackers determined to succeed at all costs, innocent lives are often lost. People who have had their cows taken, or who have seen relatives die, have been pursuing the attackers, leading to deaths on both sides. Women whose sons or husbands have been killed are left in despair, having to bear the burden of taking care of their families alone, at a huge cost to their mental health.

Participants in the two-day dialogue also argued that cattle raiding is thriving partly due to an absence of effective justice against the perpetrators. Without such justice, they argued, and without other measures (such as caps on bride prices), violence will continue.

Cattle raiding in Lakes and its neighbouring states is made more dangerous by civilians’ access to small arms and light weapons. With guns easily accessible, almost every family in Lakes, Unity or Warrap owns a rifle, and in some areas cattle herders are better armed than the police. Participants at the dialogue called for effective governance at all levels across the Wunlit Triangle – in particular, comprehensive civilian disarmament, better security provision by the police and protection of property.

2. Revenge killing

Participants identified revenge killings as a major cause of conflict in Lakes State. Fuelled by cattle raiding (and the lack of consequences for the perpetrators), revenge killings are a common phenomenon in Lakes and its neighbouring states, Unity and Warrap. As mentioned above, after an incident of cattle raiding, armed youths often pursue the raiders in an attempt to recover their raided cattle, leading to fighting and igniting a cycle of revenge and counter-revenge. Participants in the dialogue claimed that violence in Lakes State has increased since the signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCISS) and the formation of the revitalised transitional government in 2020.

Participants pointed to the weak judiciary system as one of the reasons for the increase in revenge killings in Lakes State,¹ as people whose cases are delayed sometimes take the law into their own hands as means to gain ‘justice’ (or revenge) for their lost loved ones. In the process, women and girls become victims of the conflict – killed or raped by violent groups from different communities. These cycles of revenge have an impact far beyond those who are killed, and many people – both women and men – live with trauma and stress due to horrific experiences of violence and death. At the dialogue event and during training on basic mental health and psychosocial support in October and November 2022, participants recounted their experiences of relatives being killed in revenge-related violence. One participant told how she lost two of her sons in such an incident. There are many such stories in the state, and the process of reconciliation and healing will require a lot of work from government and civil society.

3. Gender-based violence and harmful cultural norms

Gender-based violence is common in Lakes State and is a big factor in conflict dynamics at the community and family levels. Deeply rooted patriarchal cultural norms among the Dinka community fuel violence against women and girls: in Yirrol East and Cueibet Counties in 2021, fathers were reported to have beaten their daughters sometimes to the point of death for refusing to marry the men their parents had chosen, and violence from husbands towards their wives is also widespread. Many people who spoke to Saferworld and partners raised concerns over increasing cases of forced and early marriages among young girls in the state. Parents, usually fathers, arrange marriages without their daughters’ consent – which leads to long-term mental health issues. In the project’s few months of engagement with communities, the team have heard horrific stories, including attempted suicides among young women due to abusive marriages or co-wives’ conflict in polygamous families. Despite the South Sudan Government’s commitment to fighting early and forced marriages, as provided for in the penal Code and Child Act 2008, such marriages in Lakes and neighbouring states have continued to undermine the rights of women, girls and sometimes young men (who struggle to raise the high numbers of cows demanded as bride price) – leading to trauma among both genders.

Participants highlighted the exclusion of women and girls at community, county, subnational and national levels of government as a barrier to women and girls enjoying their rights under the constitution. Despite the R-ARCISS requirement that women fill 35 per cent of seats at all levels of government, women and girls in Lakes continue to be underrepresented in decision-making bodies in their communities. At family and community levels, discriminatory cultural norms deny women and girls the right to own or have a share in their parents’ property

or inherit wealth from their husbands. In Dinka culture, when a man dies, wives do not have the right to inherit any property (such as cows, goats or land); instead, the deceased's men relatives assume responsibility and ownership. In some scenarios, the woman could be denied any kind of benefit and could be chased away by these relatives.

4. Elopement

In Lakes States, a girl is viewed by the family and the community as a source of income because of the expected high number of cows paid as bride price. These cultural norms contribute to conflict and deny women the right to choose a partner. When a woman falls in love with a man who cannot afford the huge number of cows that the family expects, she might decide to elope with her lover – leading to fighting between relatives or clans. If no solution is found, revenge killings might ensue, along with an increase in gender-based violence and mental health problems.

With girls seen as a source of wealth, many parents do not consider their daughters' welfare, but rather the wealth they will acquire by ensuring they get married. This contributes to high cases of forced marriages, gender-based violence and mental health issues among young women and girls. Young men who cannot marry the bride of their choice – perhaps coming from a poor family – are also left frustrated and traumatised, and may feel compelled to raid or steal cattle from others. This may lead to loss of lives and increase conflict among communities in the state.

Recommendations

To address the above overarching challenges to communities, particularly those affecting women and girls, participants at the inter-county dialogue event in Rumbek made the following recommendations to state and national governments, international non-governmental organisations, civil society and traditional leaders.

State and national governments

- Strengthen the justice system to make it more functional, effective and accessible.
- Law-enforcement institutions should ensure proper implementation of the Child Act 2008 (which protects children's rights) and other relevant statutes to stamp out gender-based violence and promote equality between men and women in decision-making processes.
- Ensure punitive measures are adopted to deter parents and those engaged in forced and early marriages from marrying off young girls before they turn eighteen.
- Lakes State assembly should pass a bill to put a cap on bride prices of no more than 50 cows. This should

dampen the desire to acquire more cows, and therefore reduce incidence of cattle raiding.

- Carry out peaceful, uniform and comprehensive civilian disarmament, as the presence of small arms and light weapons in the hands of civilians is one of the factors fuelling conflicts in the state and in neighbouring Unity and Warrap States.
- Lakes State government should ensure the peaceful implementation of the practice of 'blood compensation', whereby victims' families are compensated for killings.
- Lakes State government should improve access to mental health and psychosocial support services at lower levels of government (*bomas* and *payams*).

Civil society and international non-governmental organisations

- Conduct awareness-raising campaigns in communities on the dangers of early and forced marriages, particularly how they hinder young girls from realising their full potential.
- Advocate to state and national governments for the implementation of affirmative action, as set out in R-ARCISS. Women should make up 35 per cent of all levels of government.
- Sensitise communities to, and raise awareness of, the dangers of small arms and light weapons in the hands of unauthorised individuals, engaging government to carry out peaceful, comprehensive and uniform civilian disarmament. Educate people about the Small Arms and Light Weapons Act 2016.
- Advocate to state and national governments to improve mental health facilities and make them accessible and affordable to women and girls in the Wunlit Triangle and across the country.
- Lobby for funds from international donors to support trauma awareness within the context of peacebuilding in South Sudan.
- Provide alternative livelihood opportunities to young people in Lakes State and the Wunlit Triangle. Training for young people in tailoring, bricklaying and carpentry (for example) will contribute to a reduction in inter-communal violence.

Traditional leaders and community members

- Chiefs and traditional leaders in Lakes should include women in traditional courts and decision-making processes. For women and girls to have faith in the traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, their voices need to be heard in decision-making processes at the community level.
- Chiefs and community elders should work with civil society organisations to challenge harmful traditional norms such as early and forced marriages.
- Parents should treat boys and girls equally, giving them access to education.



About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent, not-for-profit international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives in countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. We work in solidarity with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity.

Saferworld has been working in South Sudan since 2008. We work with communities, civil society organisations, authorities, traditional leaders and other international and national non-governmental organisations to prevent conflict and build peace. We prioritise working with women, young people and others who are excluded from decisions that affect them.

Throughout the years, we have built strong relationships with a wide network of partner organisations, developed and tested programming that achieves results, and supported our partners and the communities they work with to advocate to national and international decision-makers.

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Notes

- ¹ Until recently, revenge attacks and killings were the single highest cause of deaths in Lakes State. The 2021 appointment of Governor Rin Tuony Mabor, who has introduced executions for crimes like cattle raiding, theft, rape and robbery, has brought about a reduction in revenge killings, but more work needs to be done to reconcile communities and ensure people receive timely justice.

Cover photo: African Long-horned cattle (Ankole-Watusi) are watched over by two boys in Mingkaman camp, the largest IDP settlement in South Sudan with as many as 100,000 people living here, entirely dependent on international aid agencies to survive. Mingkaman, Lakes State, South Sudan.

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