Refugee Women’s Inclusion in the Implementation of the Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan: Challenges and Opportunities

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Overview

Protracted conflict and insecurity in South Sudan created the largest refugee crisis in Africa. Uganda hosts the majority (41 percent) of over 2.3 million South Sudanese refugees, 81 percent of whom are women and children primarily living in rural refugee settlements (94 percent). The highest number of refugee women fled the December 2013 civil war and the renewed fighting in July 2016 which signified a failure of the August 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS). The ARCSS was criticized for its insufficient inclusivity, under-prioritizing conflict transformation over power sharing, limited capacity to implement, among others and offered little hope for lasting, gender-inclusive peace. The more inclusive Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) of September 2018, and its ongoing implementation, therefore represent an important opportunity to mitigate the high human, social, economic, and political cost of decades of conflict, and to build and sustain inclusive peace.

The Deficit of Refugee Women Participation in the R-ARCSS and Why it Matters

By engaging refugees, including more women, and providing a 35 percent quota for women’s political participation, parties to the R-ARCSS acknowledged that the meaningful inclusion of diverse women and their voices is central to lasting peace. This aligns with global evidence showing that when diverse women and their voices are meaningfully included, a peace process is more likely to address the root causes of conflict, have stronger legitimacy, broader ownership and significantly increased likelihood of successful peace outcomes. Women’s influence on matters of peace lowers the risk of civil war during political transitions, reduces the chances of peace agreements failing, and contributes to sustained peace.

Current implementation of the R-ARCSS excludes South Sudanese women living in refugee settlements in Uganda from critical discussions and processes such as permanent constitution-making, establishing transitional justice mechanisms, and electoral processes, which would benefit from their participation in shaping durable peace in their country of origin and expected return. Refugee women are not provided with information about R-ARCSS implementation progress or opportunities to contribute to ongoing implementation.
discussions, they lack linkages to refugee and women representatives involved in formal processes, and receive insufficient practical support to their peacebuilding roles, particularly young women and women with disabilities.

Refugee women in Uganda are a valuable resource for sustaining peace in South Sudan. The successes of their women mediator networks which are credited for working with local governments in West Nile to curb violence, mitigate or resolve local conflicts and foster peaceful coexistence between ethnic groups, and with host communities, demonstrate their capacities to contribute to lasting peace in South Sudan. They offer South Sudan years of skills building and practical experience in community-based and led conflict early warning, early response and peace building which are necessary for improving social cohesion, and inter-communal relations in order to mitigate current conflicts, restore the country’s social fabric and work towards long-term peace. By meaningfully including the voices and agency of diverse women in refugee settlements—including youth and women with disabilities—peace parties, supporters of the R-ARCSS, and Uganda and South Sudan stand to reap the benefits of sustained peace.

Policy Options and Recommendations

1. **Government of South Sudan, Parties, and Stakeholders to the Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS)**

   a. Recognize the capacities of South Sudanese women living in refugee settlements in Uganda to meaningfully contribute to sustaining peace and implementing the revitalized peace agreement by taking practical steps to inform and include them.

   b. Work with the Government of Uganda and international partners to establish and operationalize practical measures that ensure the sustained inclusion of refugee women within settlements in decision-making on peace and the future of South Sudan.

   c. Facilitate connections and allot funding to sustained networking between women leaders in refugee settlements and women’s rights organizations in South Sudan that are involved in ensuring women’s participation and gender-responsive implementation of the R-ARCSS.

2. **Government of Uganda and Development Partners**

   a. Put in place mechanisms within refugee settlements to provide current information, consult, receive input and provide a feedback loop on R-ARCSS implementation progress to a larger number of diverse refugee women. Take advantage of existing opportunities to minimize the time and cost burden. These platforms, for instance community meetings, should consider and address barriers to access for women with disabilities and youth such as ensuring diversity in the criteria for attendance, the presence of an interpreter, an accessible location and a plan for further dissemination of presented information. In the case of online meetings, facilitate access and equip women with the skills and tools required to participate in the digital world, while mitigating security risks.

   b. Enable coordination of partners across thematic areas and policy agendas to explore opportunities to expand the reach of information and feedback on R-ARCSS among refugee women. Adopt a transnational approach to support refugee women’s peace building in both countries.

   c. Use existing humanitarian-development activities which grant development partners regular access to diverse refugee women as channels to provide information and document women’s voices on key R-ARCSS implementation issues. Incorporate strategies that promote positive masculinity and encourage men to support women’s political participation.
3. **Governments of the United States, United Kingdom, and Norway and Supporters of the R-ARCSS**

   a. Prioritize the specific case of refugee women within settlements in efforts to encourage and support the Government of South Sudan to ensure women’s meaningful participation in peace and security processes, particularly related to the R-ARCSS. Address the situation of refugee women’s participation during ongoing advocacy calling on the government and parties to R-ARCSS to fulfill the 35 percent quota. Provide practical and capacity support to ensure the R-ARCSS commitment to inclusivity despite geographic location, consistently includes women in refugee settlements.

   b. Allot a portion of current funding for implementation of the women, peace, and security agenda in South Sudan and Uganda, to interventions that facilitate the participation of women in refugee settlements in R-ARCSS implementation. Provide direct support to refugee women’s groups in Uganda and women’s rights organizations or coalitions promoting gender-responsive R-ARCSS implementation in South Sudan, to facilitate refugee women’s awareness and input into ongoing R-ARCSS processes.

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