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Refugee Women's Inclusion in Peace Agreement Implementation: Case Study of South Sudanese Women in West Nile, Uganda

By **Sandra Tumwesigye, Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Scholar**

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Women's participation and influence on peace processes are globally acknowledged as central to durable peace. This includes often-excluded, conflict-affected women who face multiple intersecting forms of discrimination, such as displaced women, who may also be young, living with disabilities, or in rural areas. The value of their meaningful, non-tokenistic inclusion applies across all stages of peace processes, including the peacebuilding which follows a signed agreement. However, this recognition is often fruitless in the face of patriarchal norms, values, and practices within institutions and communities that devalue specific women's voices and sustain male domination of peace and security decision-making spaces.

The landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace, and security (WPS), supported by National Action Plans (NAP), reinforces the need for Member States to accelerate progress in ensuring diverse women's active participation in peace processes. The African Union (AU) equally recognizes the importance of centering all women in peace and security as reflected in aspiration

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6 of Agenda 2063 and various normative policy frameworks adopted at international and continental levels. The Special Envoy of the African Union Commission (AUC) Chairperson on WPS specifically champions the priorities and inclusion of women's voices in peace and security including refugee women, acknowledging that it is a precondition to successfully silencing the guns in Africa.

Evidence, as exemplified in the Philippines and Colombia, confirms 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.¹ Studies also show that women's influence on matters of peace is critical to its durability and their leadership in decision-making during political transitions reduces the likelihood for civil war.² Statistical analysis also indicates that peace agreements are 64 percent less likely to fail when women's groups are involved, and 35 percent more likely to last for fifteen years when women participate in their creation.³ The importance of more gender-inclusive peace processes cannot be overstated considering its direct link to sustaining peace and contributing to post-conflict reconstruction.

This acknowledgment is reflected in national-level policy frameworks. South Sudan, which accounts for the highest number of refugees in Africa, through its NAP on WPS commits to uplifting women's role in sustainable peace and enabling the broad participation of women, including displaced women. The Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) includes a commitment to inclusivity with a clear focus on ensuring the meaningful participation of women and refugees. Uganda, Africa's top refugee-hosting country in its 3rd NAP, incorporates the participation of refugee women in conflict prevention and resolution as a key emerging issue. It is clear that both nations and the region stand to benefit from ensuring that implementation of the revitalized peace agreement includes South Sudanese women in all their diversities. This includes those living in refugee settlements, particularly young women and women with disabilities, whose intersectional disadvantage has not precluded them from demonstrating leadership and creating impact for peace.

These two countries are the focus of this research paper, which shines a light on the experiences of South Sudanese women in refugee settlements in West Nile, Uganda in participating in implementing the revitalized peace agreement. The research focuses on refugee women, including young women and women with disabilities, who have taken leadership in conflict prevention and peacebuilding in Uganda as members of the Adjumani Women Peace Mediator Network, working impactfully with key government actors and local women leaders. It also follows the acknowledgment that women in refugee settings across Africa are not meaningfully or consistently engaged in peace processes and the implementation of peace agreements.⁴ This paper, therefore, highlights the absence of refugee women in West Nile settlements from ongoing discussions and efforts to implement the R-ARCSS while addressing the shortage of documentation, attention, and support to their experience. The paper also proposes practical measures, informed by refugee women's perspectives, to support fulfillment of the NAPs and R-ARCSS's clear commitment to meaningfully include women and refugees in the South Sudan peace process.

Conflict, Displacement, and Shaping Inclusive Peace in South Sudan

Over 84 million people globally, including 30 million in Africa, have been forced to flee their homes and live as refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons, largely due to conflict, insecurity, and repression.⁵ A third of the global refugee population lives in Africa, which in 2021 experienced the highest number of new displacements owing to violence and instability.⁶ Protracted conflict and insecurity in South Sudan birthed "the largest refugee crisis in Africa"⁷ with over 2.3 million refugees now living in neighboring Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda. Uganda hosts the majority (41 percent⁸) of South Sudanese refugees, 81 percent of whom are women and (often unaccompanied) children⁹ primarily living in rural refugee settlements (94 percent).

This situation arose two and a half years after the country's July 2011 independence, which was made possible through the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The CPA included the self-determination referendum, a 25 percent representation quota for women, and had renewed citizens'



optimism for peace and for an end to decades of conflict. Women in their numbers and diversities (representing 60 percent of the population) were central to Southern Sudan's secession from the North, and the value of their political participation was publicly acknowledged. Various actors, including the Vice President, appealed to urban and rural women to vote, proposing various accommodations to reap the benefits of their participation. For instance, he encouraged the restructuring of domestic roles and guaranteed women's security at voting sites.¹⁰ For these women, the new nation and its interim constitution presented clear opportunities to address the priorities of "women across age, livelihoods, religious affiliations, and political ideology," and to take part in shaping lasting inclusive peace and the country's future.¹¹

For many women, the post-independence optimism regarding their role in peace and state building was short lived. In December 2013, political conflict and power struggles within the government and ruling party erupted into civil war, leading to a mass influx of South Sudanese refugees, mostly women and children, into Uganda. Women and girls fled (and in some cases survived) sexual violence, including rape, killings, abduction, torture, destruction of homes and property, food shortages, and the associated psychological trauma. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) mediated peace process, including two years of talks, led to the January 2014 cessation of hostilities agreement and the August 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), which had an opportunity to end the war as well as undo the regression in women's rights and advancement. Critiques of this peace process, however agree on key ARCSS shortcomings, including its insufficient inclusivity—a focus heavy on power sharing and light on conflict transformation, which would be valuable for women, including the displaced. The ARCSS process also presented limited evidence of the political will, broad national ownership, and implementing authorities necessary to translate the peace agreement into action.¹²

In July 2016, a few months after signing the peace deal, renewed fighting between factions loyal to the President and Vice-President resulted in large-scale violence, deaths, rape, widespread insecurity, and a massive surge of refugees into Uganda, with the number of daily arrivals tripling within two weeks.¹³ The 2017 IGAD-led High Level Revitalization Forum to revive the ARCSS registered better results in its inclusivity and led to the September 2018 signing of the Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). This followed public calls against exclusionary peace talks and women organizing across South Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda to form a coalition and collectively lobby for inclusion in alliance with development partners and regional organizations. The R-ARCSS process is lauded for including more women delegates, women's voices and signatories (7 women out of 17) than ARCSS and for article 14.4 committing to a 35 percent quota for women's political participation. However, this has not translated into inclusive implementation. Women's lobby for stronger inclusion in the transitional government continues as they remain under-represented in decision-making, holding 20 percent of national governance positions, 11-17 percent at state level and less than 10 percent at county level.¹⁴

Including Women within West Nile Refugee Settlements in Implementing the Revitalized Peace Agreement

Accounts of refugee women's flight and life in the refugee settlements demonstrate the gendered nature of conflict and displacement and how it amplifies the gender inequalities women typically face, including their exclusion from decision-making on peace or resolving the conflict. In spite of that, the experiences of South Sudanese refugee women with varying arrival dates, ethnic backgrounds, ages, and settlements, provide evidence of their continued interest in and capacity for conflict resolution and peacebuilding even while in Uganda.¹⁵

UNHCR and host governments notably contributed to inclusive R-ARCSS peace negotiations by facilitating the participation of refugees from rural settlements. A representation of 16 from 6 countries, including Uganda, met the parties to the R-ARCSS in August and September 2018. They committed to inclusive implementation, to recognizing refugees' citizenship rights and their voices.¹⁶ Similar examples



of support to refugee participation exist during the implementation phase, such as the November 2020 National Dialogue Conference on Peace, where UNHCR and partners supported a dozen refugees to take part online. UNHCR has also over time reinforced its commitment to ensure that refugee women meaningfully participate by sharing knowledge on key instruments and strengthening their leadership skills.¹⁷

However, the extent to which women were included is unclear as documentation of these engagements uses gender-neutral language and does not detail how many of the representatives were women or the wider process of consulting their constituencies, specifically women. Interviewed refugee women in Adjumani district were aware of a refugee woman leader from a nearby settlement who took part in closed-door meetings during the Addis Ababa talks, but none had information on the issues she presented or received updates regarding the discussions held. They were also not aware of any platforms put in place to facilitate feedback or provide a larger number of women refugees with information on the R-ARCSS. Other reports from civil society actors working in humanitarian settings and refugee women's groups in Uganda also highlight their exclusion from decision-making and discourse related to R-ARCSS implementation.¹⁸

In the R-ARCSS, South Sudan peace parties also commit to disseminate the peace agreement to South Sudanese in refugee settlements, safeguard their rights to citizenship, and they acknowledge the need to focus on the majority youth among the refugees. Refugee women living in Adjumani and Yumbe districts of West Nile have been able to receive information on the peace agreement from research dissemination sessions and through meetings, including Juba-based women peacebuilders engaged in advocating for gender-responsive R-ARCSS implementation. One such example was facilitated, with the support of UN Women, by a feminist organization¹⁹ working with refugee women in Uganda and focused on amplifying their voices in shaping the future of their country of origin and expected return. However, these sessions, which provide valuable opportunities for information and networked advocacy for refugee women, do not occur regularly. As a result, interviewed refugee women in Adjumani reported lacking knowledge of possible communication channels to get current information on R-ARCSS implementation aside from occasional news from relatives on the security situation and women's representation in government.

While attention among advocates for women's participation in peace and political processes is being primarily paid to fulfillment of the 35 percent quota—which is indeed a critical priority for advancing women's rights and voice—the R-ARCSS also includes provisions on key issues from which voices of refugee women in settlements risk being excluded such as governance, constitution development, security, transitional justice, and resource management as well as the oversight and monitoring of implementation. For instance, interviewed refugee women in Adjumani reported no knowledge of the initiated permanent constitution-making process, the related draft bill, and the potential opportunities to participate through refugee representatives that will make input to the National Constitutional Committee or of the expressed commitment to inclusivity despite “physical ability, geographic location, level of education, language, or any other reasons.”²⁰

Interviewed representatives of the Refugee Welfare Council, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and development partners in Adjumani who support refugee women's leadership and collaborate in implementing peaceful co-existence efforts also highlighted conceptual barriers to their participation. They included negative social norms and mindsets about refugee women's capacity to contribute meaningfully to peace and nation-building discussions. In some cases, despite women's successful involvement in conflict early warning and response by documenting, resolving, or referring community-level conflict cases to responsible authorities, men do not allow their more public participation in peace and security issues due to patriarchal cultural beliefs. Young refugee women also reported facing additional resistance and pressure to prove their worthiness due to their limited life experience and views about their level of education. They highlighted the additional exclusion of deaf women and those with physical disabilities in the absence of sign language interpretation or special accommodations to enable their participation.



Refugee women acknowledged the value of support from local leaders, OPM, District Peace Committees, civil society organizations (CSOs), and development partners in improving the enabling environment for their roles in peacebuilding. However, they also highlighted the need for broader and more sustained support for their participation in R-ARCSS implementation processes, specifically for young women and women with disabilities. While organizations like the Peace Centre have the advantage of working in South Sudan and Uganda on peacebuilding, other CSOs in Adjumani with interest in supporting refugee women's leadership highlighted the limitations of their thematic focus and geographic scope. The current nature of funding for CSOs focuses on pressing protection challenges and social service needs. In cases where partners' activities prioritize support to local leadership, typically, the focus is on peaceful co-existence within the refugee-hosting districts, limiting organizations' ability to consistently facilitate linkages with actors and discourse on peace agreement implementation in South Sudan.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

The case of South Sudanese women living in refugee settlements in Uganda highlights the need for a more proactive and sustained approach to ensuring refugee women's inclusion in peacebuilding in their countries of origin. It demonstrates the essential need for parties to peace agreements and actors engaged in agreement implementation to recognize and consistently engage the capacities of women living in refugee settlements by putting in place practical measures to facilitate their inclusion. This includes ensuring access to information on implementation progress and potential entry points for their participation or influence, putting feedback mechanisms in place, and linking refugee women to other non-displaced women who are contributing to or advocating for gender-responsive implementation of the agreement. This also highlights the critical role of refugee-hosting countries where governments at national and sub-national levels along with civil society actors can enable refugee women's inclusion in peacebuilding in their countries of origin by supporting refugee women's leadership and their work promoting peaceful coexistence locally; using current activities to provide information and gather refugee women's views on implementation progress; and connecting refugee women to women's rights groups and organizations in their country of origin for networked advocacy.

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Ms. Sandra Tumwesigye is the Advocacy and Partnerships Manager at Women's International Peace Centre, a feminist peace building organization with a mission to ignite women's leadership, amplify their voices and deepen their activism in creating peace. Her research, policy advocacy, and programming work is focused on promoting women's leadership in conflict and conflict settings, women's meaningful participation in peace discussions and processes, and their efforts to transform the current nature and outcomes. She has a Master of Arts in Peace Education from the University of Peace, a Master's degree in Cooperation and Development from the Istituto Universitario di Studi Superiori (IUSS), and a Bachelor of Mass Communication from Makerere University. She was a Southern Voices (SVNP) Scholar during the spring (January to April) 2022 term at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C.



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1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
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