
War, Migration and Work

Changing social relations in the South Sudan borderlands

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Cover image: A road in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal © Nicki Kindersley

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The Rift Valley Institute works in eastern and central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development.

Northern Bahr el-Ghazal Borderlands



Base map data source: OpenStreetMap
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South Sudan states are according to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005)

Summary

Before independence in South Sudan, the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderlands had long been an economic frontier between northern and southern Sudan. The Second Sudanese Civil War—partly a continuation of the exploitation of this frontier—reshaped social relations and livelihoods rendering them more dependent on cash-based markets.

After the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and subsequent independence of South Sudan, those people the war had displaced northwards to Darfur and further afield to Khartoum, moved back to rebuild their lives. Post-war Northern Bahr el-Ghazal was not the same as before, however, with livelihoods more precarious and market dependent.

In spite of the changes war and displacement had wrought, male elders still expected to control the labour of young men to rebuild cattle herds lost in conflict. Continued military recruitment for the new wars in South Sudan took men away from home, leaving women without support, who were then forced to find ways to generate income for their families.

This precarious post-war cash-based market economy and the rise of paid work created alternatives to traditional male and female roles. The social perception of work—previously seen as a form of servitude—also changed, with paid work becoming more prestigious. As a result, young men were less willing to work for their male elders and women realized the necessity of income generation made them less dependent on their husbands.

Though paid work offered partial escape from previous generational and gendered obligations, the new international frontier with Sudan became the last barrier of the old order for young men and women to overcome. Male officials controlling the border felt it their duty to prevent the South Sudanese labour force—seen as a collective national asset—leaving for better paid work in Sudan.

Market dependence in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal and the mobility of labour, including across the international boundary, has a distinct generational and gendered dimension. This is clearly articulated in the local discourse of the young and old, and men and women. It also demonstrates how the impact of war and displacement, in particular the transformation of livelihoods, has sharpened the developing recognition of economic and social rights.

1. Introduction

The Northern Bahr el-Ghazal region in South Sudan, bordering Sudan, has experienced profound economic changes since the 1980s. These are connected with the history of conflict in the region and have resulted in a shift away from the traditional subsistence economy based around cattle ownership and cultivation, towards patterns of wage labour, migration and recruitment in to government-back militias.¹

This report outlines how the changing economy has affected social relations, particularly between the old and the young, and men and women. The result is a fraying social system, where intra-family disputes, including violence, are on the rise, and the old order is being increasingly challenged and eroded. The report is also a discrete case study on how transnational mobility across borders, encouraged by the growth of paid work and cash-based market economies, is part of changing generational and gendered relationships.

This report is the result of field research carried out in December 2018 and April 2019. Semi-structured interviews were carried out in towns and villages on the South Sudan border with Sudan, including in Nyalath, Wadweil, Kiir Adem, Apada, Majok, Warawar and Ariath. Interviews were focused on young men and women, particularly those who had returned from periods of work in Sudan or were hoping to cross the border. Community leaders, especially the elderly, were also interviewed about their relationship with and views of the changing work and life patterns of younger generations.

The report is a product of the X-Border Local Research Network, a collaborative research project between the Rift Valley Institute, The Asia Foundation and the Carnegie Middle East Centre.

¹ See Edward Thomas, 'Moving Towards Markets: Cash, Commodification and Conflict in South Sudan', Rift Valley Institute: London, June 2019; Nicki Kindersley and Joseph Diing Majok, 'Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan's Borderlands', Rift Valley Institute: London, June 2019.

2. The growth of paid work

The Second Sudanese Civil War was officially brought to an end in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Khartoum government. Many southern Sudanese people who had been displaced by the conflict, escaping into more northerly regions of Sudan, returned home. Upon their return, they planned to rebuild their communities, finding employment and improved government services, but their hopes of a better future were left mostly unfulfilled. Many fell back in to poverty and were forced to seek low-paid work for survival. This saw the growth of two major new trends: Recruitment in to government-backed militias; and cross-border labour migration (mostly northwards to Sudan).

Militia recruitment

Soon after independence was declared, the government started recruiting thousands of young men into militias that would protect the border from the expected incursions by the Sudanese army and pro-Khartoum militias. Many men from the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal region—mostly returnees from the north—joined the militias. This was driven by two things: First, militia work was one of the few reliable sources of employment in the region; second, many men from the region were strongly motivated to protect newly created South Sudan from incursions from the north.

In 2012, Juba fought a short-lived border conflict with Khartoum, which included a brief occupation of the disputed oil-producing region of Heglig. While conflict with the north did not escalate to full-blown war, militia recruitment in the region restarted in 2013–2014, shortly before and during the early stages of the new civil war when the government needed forces to fight rebels in the Upper Nile region. Later, in 2016, when fighting spread to Greater Equatoria and Western Bahr el-Ghazal, the militias were deployed in these regions too.

For unemployed young men, recruitment in to the militias became a means of survival in a challenging economic environment. An elder in Wadweil, a village near Aweil, says:

The reason why these young men joined the military is that there are no jobs. ... The only option available to them is the military. And if there were jobs available after peace, young men could find opportunities and not all of them have become soldiers.²

Mawien, a migrant labourer recently returned from southern Darfur, explains:

² Interview with cattle camp elder, Wedweil, 12 December, 2018.

Young men accept [joining a militia] sometimes when they don't have other options left. ... When a young man fails to find work and isn't able to buy himself the best clothes he wants and life becomes miserable, he accepts to join them as another option to try his luck. They are even deceived [into believing] that they will be paid in US dollars.³

Labour migration

An alternative to joining the militias is to cross the border in to Sudan to look for work there. Most young men who have done this head to Darfur, Khartoum or the large agricultural schemes around Gezira in central Sudan. In addition to agricultural work, they take jobs making bricks, provide laundry services or other manual labour. Many young men choose to go to Darfur, despite the conflicts that continue there, because they were born and grew up there in the 1980s, mostly in camps for displaced people. This means that they have connections with the local Misseriya and Rizeigat elites, who offer them seasonal jobs on their farms.

The rise of paid work and the growing cash-based economy have started to change the social perception of paid manual labour. Before the Second Sudanese Civil War, when wealth and status in Dinka society largely depended on the ownership of cattle, paid jobs were regarded as *loony*, a form of slavery—a person doing manual labour was referred to as *alony*, a slave. Those who did not own cattle and sought paid work were known as *abur*—men with no cattle—and held a very low status.

This began to change during the Second Sudanese Civil War, when many communities lost their cattle in raids by Arab Misseriya and Rizeigat militias. This forced many people to seek sanctuary in the northern villages and towns close to the camps for displaced people, including Daein, Nyala, Abananusa, Meiram and Khartoum. Finding wage paying jobs often became necessary for survival in the camps.

The exposure of the Dinka community to the wage economy, often in the north, has changed social perceptions around work. Work that was previously seen as *loony* is now *luoi* (a more respectful term for work or a job). In place of *alony*, *ajiro*—the Arabic word for servant—is used to describe work that is increasingly seen as a legitimate method of accumulating wealth. Young men who have moved to towns and engage in paid work support their families financially. Others accumulate their own wealth and are able to pay the dowries for their marriage, or finance their own education, with very little support from their families.

³ Interview with Joseph Mawien, migrant labourer, Kiir Adem, 11 December, 2018.

3. Changing inter-generational relations

Traditionally, young Dinka men in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal region were expected to work as cattle keepers and live in cattle camps. When young men were approaching marriage age, they often went north to find wage-earning jobs. The money that they made was then spent buying clothes for their wife-to-be or to fund their dowry payment. Usually, after the wedding the young men would move out of the cattle camp and set up house with their new wife. Those whose families did not have their own cattle lived in their clan camp, where cattle were cared for collectively. They were supported by their extended family when they decided to marry. These traditions are now changing.

Leaving the cattle camps

The practice of young men going to live in the camps has been challenged by the rise of paid work. This is becoming increasingly attractive to young men, who refuse communal cattle keeping assignments and instead opt for jobs, often across the border in Sudan, which gives them greater independence from their family and clan.

When war between the Khartoum government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) broke out in the 1980s, the Bahr el-Ghazal region suffered from raiding by Khartoum-backed militias, which often targeted cattle herds and forced thousands of people to abandon their homes. After the war ended in 2005, many displaced people returned to the region. Alongside those who stayed, they began to build up their herds again. This included assigning young men to cattle keeping work. An elder in the cattle camp in Nyalath, a village to the west of Aweil town, describes how 'it is the duty of young boys to look after calves and take them to drink at the water points and the older men look after the cattle and protect them from wild animals'.⁴

A tradition remains—mostly vocalized by older men—that younger men should stay in the cattle camps to look after the collective herd. Elders who still hold on to this tradition say that they do not like to see their sons leave their cattle camps to seek work elsewhere. A cattle camp elder at Wadweil explains, 'All these young men you are seeing are all sons of this village and are the owners of these cattle and they cannot leave their own cattle and go to work for someone else.'⁵

Fewer young men now want to take up cattle keeping work. Young boys from cattle owning families are often taken by their families to stay in the cattle camps during school holidays to assist their fathers and other elders. When the holidays end, however, they return to school to continue their education, leaving the elderly men with a few younger

4 Interview with cattle camp elder, Nyalath, 15 December 2018.

5 Interview with cattle camp elder, Wadweil, 12 December 2018.

ones to assist them. A cattle camp leader offers an overview of the situation: ‘These boys, our children, are now here in the cattle camp with us in the dry seasons, when the schools are closed and when the schools re-open, they go back. ... And we remain alone in the cattle camp to look after cattle.’⁶

In addition to young men opting to pursue their education, only returning to the cattle camp during holidays, others leave the camps to pursue seasonal agricultural work. Joseph Mawien, similar to many young men in the cattle camps and villages of Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, moves every year across the border to Darfur to work on the farms of the local Rizeigat and Misseriya elites around Daein and Muthariq (a relatively peaceful region of South Darfur). During the agricultural season, he refuses to stay in his clan cattle camp, instead moving to find a paid job in Darfur. He elaborates:

I left here in July and I went there [Darfur] to work on the farms. ... My work there is only farming. The other job available is brickmaking. ... Now this dry season brickmaking has started. Some young men who didn’t want to come [to Darfur] have proceeded to Khartoum and others to Daein to find work.⁷

Young men generally move to Darfur between July and August at the end of the farming season in their home areas. Most work on farms in Darfur until October or November, before returning home. However, some travel northwards to Khartoum where they usually take up brick-making work during the dry months. Most of these young men return from Khartoum in April or May to cultivate with their families.

Generational conflict

The choices that many young men make to leave the cattle camps and seek alternative work, often in Sudan, is straining relations between young men and elders. Most young men leave without the knowledge of their fathers, which creates tension between them. Francis Piol, an elder in Nyamlel, a town to the west of Aweil, complains that his son and other young men in the neighbourhood escaped to Sudan without his knowledge. He says, ‘One of my sons escaped and went to the north. ... He found some young men who were going and he went with them. I have not talked to him since he left.’⁸

A cattle camp youth leader from Wadweil provides more detail on how these young men escape:

They go even if we try to stop them. They would escape. ... Two young men from this cattle camp have recently escaped and went to the north. My own brother, who is younger than me and was the one looking after the cattle, and another

6 Interview with cattle camp elder, Nyalath, 15 December 2018.

7 Interview with Joseph Mawien and Angon Deng, Kiir Adem, 11 December 2018.

8 Interview with Francis Piol, elder, Nyamlel, 12 December 2018.

boy have escaped to the north. And another one here just escaped to the north two days ago. ...We can't manage to stop them from going.⁹

It is not only cattle keeping from which young men try to escape. Some who have been sent to school by their families leave because they prefer paid work instead. An elder in Wadweil says that his only son, who had been in school, escaped with other young men to Darfur. The departure of educated youth is seen as a loss to the community, which will also affect the prospects that young men have in future:

What we knew was that a child who would devote his time to education is he who will bring positive change. But now they have turned it into something bad. If you ask your son to study, he would think you are asking him to do something bad and he then might escape and run away to go find a job to get money of his own. But he will understand in future, when he has failed, and those he left in school are successful and have good jobs. This is when he will regret it.¹⁰

A cattle camp youth leader from Wadweil expresses resistance to the departure of so many of his peers to seek work in the north, explaining: 'They knew that if they told me, I would not accept to let them go to the north. They have school certificates and escaped to the north. They left school and the cattle keeping work, too.'¹¹

The attempts by the community to control young men and to decide their future demonstrates that elders see youth as a clan or community asset. For this reason, their future can be decided by their clan or community leadership. It is this attempt to control young men that has led to many leaving their communities against the will of their elders.

⁹ Interview with cattle camp youth leader, Wadweil, 12 December 2018.

¹⁰ Interview with elder, Wadweil, 12 December, 2019.

¹¹ Interview with cattle camp youth leader, Wadweil, 12 December 2019.

4. Relations between men and women

The economic crisis and inability, or unwillingness, of men to provide for their families has compelled women to take more independent decisions regarding the well-being of their families, including moving with their children in to Sudan (despite the dangers), often without consulting their husbands. This has led to a deterioration of relations between men and women in the region.

Rising domestic conflicts

Thiep Deng, a hairdresser operating in a small kiosk in Warawar market, says that his wife left for Sudan six months earlier without consulting him or the wider family. Thiep continues, 'Now I want to go to north because my wife has escaped and went there with my four boys. ... I am now preparing to go to bring her back.'¹²

Some women have chosen to divorce their absent husbands and have married other men—locals or from the camps in Sudan. Some of these women crossed with their children to the refugee camps in Meiram and Kario. Others have travelled as far as Khartoum. Alic Deng, an SPLA soldier in Ariath, tells his story:

I am now alone in the house without a woman. ... If I have to have food, I give grain to a woman in the neighbourhood to cook for me. My wife escaped to Khartoum while I was away in the barracks. My two daughters eloped—one was taken to Wau and the other to Amiet in Abyei. I don't have money to get there.¹³

The decision by women to divorce their legal husbands has led to a sharp rise in domestic violence. When men return to their homes and find that they have lost their status and influence over their households, they can become abusive and violent.

For example, Alic Deng returned home after years of military service in the SPLA to find that his wife had divorced him, moved to Khartoum and married another man there. When he discovered this, he travelled to Khartoum and attacked her. As a means to force her to return south with him, he also took her to the chief's court in Khartoum.¹⁴ She resisted and stayed with her new husband in Khartoum. Alic Deng elaborates:

My wife turned into an enemy to me. I beat her severely when I came out of prison. She forged a divorce certificate with her new husband, who she was living with. I grabbed this certificate from her with force in the market of Libya in Khar-

¹² Interview with Thiep Deng, hairdresser, Warawar, 13 December 2019.

¹³ Interview with Alic Deng, SPLA soldier, Ariath, 10 December 2019.

¹⁴ Chief's court; is a designated area where chief, clan leaders and elders sit to resolve customary cases of the people they represent.

toum and took it. I now have it in my bag. ... I took her to court and I demanded that she and my children come south. She said she would follow but up until today, she has not. ...She does not talk to me. She will insult me on the spot but she sends her son some money. She sends money to her son in Apada but she never sends me money. She said that she does not need me.¹⁵

Impact on the family

The strained relations between men and women, combined with strengthening patterns of labour migration in the region and the mass recruitment of young men into militias, has divided many families in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal. During the conflicts, many men were killed or suffered injury, while others simply lost contact with their families. This has left many women struggling to find food for their children. It has also placed more responsibility on them within the family. Many women have been forced to take jobs, start their own businesses or gather wild foods to survive.

Abuk Chan, a returnee from Khartoum, explains that her husband joined the *Mathiang Anyoor* (brown caterpillar) militia—Dinka dominated, allied to President Salva Kiir—in 2012 and disappeared when he was in Juba where he was deployed after his training:

We used to talk when he was in Juba but then he changed his phone number when I asked him to send money to buy food for his children. ...I just sell peanuts to buy food. I could buy a *malou*¹⁶ of groundnuts in the market and then make peanuts to sell or cultivate on other people's farms for cash to buy food.¹⁷

This has forced Abuk to find work to support her family alone. This type of situation has motivated many women in the region to set up small businesses or find paid work, mostly as labourers on farms. As Ariec, a widow living in Aweil town who sells vegetables, says:

My husband is dead. He died from war and that's why life and my kids' lives have become difficult. I cannot manage life in the village and I find it better to live in town and gamble life here. At least in town I can sell smaller items like peanuts, roasted groundnuts and vegetable leaves and I am able to pay my children's school fees and buy food for them.¹⁸

In Aweil and the surrounding areas, widows, wives of soldiers and underemployed men sell vegetables, peanuts and tea in the markets. They also collect wild fruits or dry cow dung to sell as fuel. Others work on the farms of the local elites or move to Kiir Adem, on

¹⁵ Interview with Alic Deng, SPLA soldier, Ariath, 10 December 2019.

¹⁶ A *malou* (*malwa* in Sudanese Arabic) is unit of measure that is about 3.1 kg. It is usually portioned out using a USAID four-litre vegetable oil tin.

¹⁷ Interview with Abuk Chan, returnee from Khartoum, Apada, 8 December 2018.

¹⁸ Interview with Alek and Ariec Akot (widow), vegetable traders, Aweil town, 9 December 2018.

the border with Sudan, to make grass mats, which are in high demand from the Darfuri traders who regularly cross in to South Sudan.

Women's cross-border movement

Economic pressures connected to a poor harvest in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal region in 2014 forced many women to cross in to Sudan. This movement of women across the border continued through 2015–2016 when the harvest was worse and the price of sorghum in the markets rose rapidly soon after harvest and was expected to worsen during the lean season. In 2017, the harvest was better and the price of sorghum lower but the migration of women and children continued.

As a response, state authorities and border security forces started stopping women and children from crossing unless they had a permit to do so (issued by local Peace Committees).¹⁹ These permits are expensive, however, and most women cannot afford them. They are also unable to pay bribes to those who can smuggle them across the border in order to avoid the border checkpoints.

A female trader in Apada elaborates:

You can move with your children and pretend you are going to Kiir [Adem] but after reaching there, which is the border post between south and north, you wouldn't be allowed to proceed ahead with your children. Your children could be asked to get down from the truck at the bridge and you, the mother, would be told to go yourself.²⁰

Ariec, a single mother now stranded in Majok with her children, adds detail:

I had decided to go to north this year in April but the government soldiers on the road stopped me and arrested me with my children. ... They just detained me and I accepted to return. They could have beaten me if I had refused.²¹

Women and children are seen as a collective asset of the country, a phenomenon that has been called 'the nationalization of wombs of the southern Sudanese women'.²² The movement of women and children across the border to Sudan is seen as being a risk to the health of the country. Apada market women leader and a tea lady explained:

Children do not belong to their mothers and these children were brought from the north to vote for separation in the referendum and to increase the country's

¹⁹ Peace Committees are designed to resolve disputes over shared resources—water and pasture—in the borderland. They are comprised by chiefs from the Dinka, Misseriya and Rizeigat communities. In this case, the committee meets twice a year in Gok Machar or Warawar to discuss resource sharing and the movement, safety and protection of people, and their herds, across the border.

²⁰ Interview with a female trader, Apada, 8 December 2018.

²¹ Interview with Ariec, widow, Majok Nyinthiou, 14 December 2018

²² Jok Madut Jok, 'Militarization and Gender Violence in South Sudan', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 34/4 (1999): 427–442.

population. If the border is open and free movement is allowed, people will go—and the population will go down. The population has already decreased in these last eight years.²³

While trying to move with her children across the border, Ariec was told by the security personnel who detained her in April 2018 at Warguet bridge—the last exit to Meiram in southern Kordofan— that women who take their children to the north are ‘confusing South Sudan and you are among those who want to destroy it’.²⁴

Some women still try to cross the border secretly at night through the forest. Bhakita, a single mother, moved to Majok with the intention of crossing the border to Meiram with her children. She was, however, blocked from crossing by the border security. Bhakita finds life unbearable in Majok because her peanut business is collapsing and has considered going north through the forest at night as she cannot afford to pay for the permit. She explains, ‘To go to Khartoum needs money and nobody would allow me to cross to the north with my children and that’s why some women were lost in the forest when they tried to escape across the border through the forest.’²⁵

Nyibol also considers escaping to the north with her children. Her husband, who was an SPLA finance officer died a few months ago, and she says that she cannot raise her children alone in Majok as life is becoming too expensive:

I will go. I will sneak like other women who sneaked before. ... I will travel at night to pass through the forest to by-pass security. I will go with them [my children]. ... The older ones will help me to carry the smaller ones because they have nothing to eat here and we must go.²⁶

²³ Interview with a market woman and tea maker, Apada, 8 December 2018.

²⁴ Interview with Ariec, widow, Majok, 14 December 2018.

²⁵ Interview with Bhakita, single mother, Majok, 18 December 2018.

²⁶ Interview with Nyibol, single mother, Majok, 14 December 2018.

5. Conclusion

The long-term and continuing economic transformation of the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderlands between Sudan and South Sudan has led to the increased marketization and monetization of life. The impact on previous livelihoods and social authorities in this context, in addition to continuing war, forced many men to join the army or other militias operating in the borderland regions, or seek work across the border in Sudan. This has split families and, combined with poor harvests, forced women to move to Sudan with their children or take on paid work. Local (male) authorities try to prevent cross-border movement since women and children are seen as national assets.

It is not only women who are seen as community and family wealth and property, however. The labour of young men is also seen in this way. The dynamics of labour mobility in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderlands present a valuable case study not only of how local economies are changing in South Sudan but also how cross-border movement is perceived by those who want to leave, and those who want them to stay. Labour mobility and migration for paid work is shaping new generational and gender roles. This is also impacting family life.

Work underway in the second year of the X-Border Local Research Network will further explore the gendered and generational aspects of transnational (labour) mobility. This will include: a better understanding of the network of economic opportunities for young men and their perceptions of their economic future; and how the authority of male elders attempts to control young men through the management of education and work opportunities.

Glossary of acronyms, words and phrases

<i>alony</i>	(<i>Dinka</i>) slave
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005)
<i>loony</i>	(<i>Dinka</i>) slavery
malou	(<i>Simple arabic</i>) a unit of measurement that is about 1.3 kg
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
Abuur	Man with no cattle

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War, Migration and Work outlines how the changing economy has affected social relations in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderlands, particularly between the old and the young, and men and women. The result is a fraying social system, where intra-family disputes, including violence, are on the rise, and the old order is being increasingly challenged and eroded. This report is also a discrete case study on how transnational mobility across borders, encouraged by the growth of paid work and cash-based market economies, is part of changing generational and gendered relationships.

