

Centrality of Formal Education in Women Empowerment in Bor, South Sudan

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Abstract: This paper explores the central role of formal education in empowering women in Bor, South Sudan, a region severely affected by prolonged conflict leading to high dropout rates, low enrollment, and deteriorated educational institutions. Cultural practices such as early marriage, teenage pregnancies, and patriarchal norms significantly hinder girls' access to education, as they are often viewed as sources of wealth through marriage and bride price. Data reveals that 48% of the population lacks formal education, with women disproportionately affected. Additional barriers include poverty, lack of female role models due to few female teachers, insecurity, and the prioritization of boys' education over girls'. These factors contribute to high illiteracy rates among women, limiting their participation in public spaces and decision-making processes. The study underscores that education is a critical tool for empowerment, fostering personal agency, self-efficacy, and informed decision-making. Recommendations include investing in both formal education and lifelong learning tailored to local contexts, promoting gender-responsive teaching methods, and challenging oppressive gender norms. By enhancing women's access to education, not only are individual lives improved, but broader societal benefits such as reduced poverty and inclusive development are achieved. The paper advocates for a blended approach to empowerment that combines education with practical initiatives, enabling women in Bor to lead healthier and more prosperous lives.

Key words: Education, Economic Empowerment, Fragile Ecosystems, inclusive, equality, and lifelong.

Introduction

Years of war in South Sudan have left high dropout rates, low retention and enrollment rates and dilapidated education institutions. Teacher training has also been affected and few teachers are willing to work in conflict and fragile ecosystems. The onset of rapid climate-change shocks has exacerbated this situation. In any society, education plays a critical role as a tool for empowerment. This is particularly the case where women are concerned. This is because women and girls are more likely to drop-out of school, fail to enroll and remain in school due to societal demands of patriarchy as well as such problems as early marriages and teenage pregnancies. Cultural definitions of adulthood do not align with chronological age (Edward, 2014). Among many communities, a girl is considered an adult ready for marriage upon the onset of menses (Madut, 2020). Child marriage logically leads to non-enrollment of girls in school and/or their dropout, eventually resulting in high illiteracy among women. Oxfam International (2017) cites that 64 percent of females and 38 percent of males had never been to school in South Sudan. In effect, the number of women with formal education is very low (World Vision, n.d.) resulting in their poor presence and participation in public spaces where the same is required (Edward, 2014).

Girls' education is also compromised by parents who retain them for domestic work (Madut, 2020) and lack of menstrual health products whereas that of boys' is mainly constrained by lack of finances (Oxfam International, 2017). Low numbers of female teachers who could act as influencers, insecurity (Kur, 2012) and appetite for bride wealth also discourage parents from releasing their daughters for formal education (Madut, 2020). In fact, education is not seen as adding any value in preparing girls for domestic roles. Moreover, educated women are perceived to be alienated and less feminine, alongside

the fear that girls in school can easily get pregnant and hence attract lower bride wealth (Kur, 2012). Promoting girls education and enrolling women in lifelong learning is thus important.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques in a participatory cross-sectional design. It gathered perspectives from men, women, youth, and most at-risk populations. Quantitative methods collected statistical data, while qualitative interviews provided in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences. The research was conducted in Bor County, Jonglei State, South Sudan, covering six payams: Makuach, Anyidi, Baidit, Kolnyang, Jalle, and Bor Town. Bor County spans 120,000 square kilometers, characterized by flat plains and clay soils, and stands at 320 meters above sea level. The region is prone to seasonal flooding. The county borders Lakes State, Twic East, and Pibor County, and has an estimated population of 350,000. The primary livelihoods include pastoralism, farming, and fishing. Additionally, stakeholders from public and private sectors, including government officials, were consulted to ensure diverse perspectives. A multi-stage sampling technique was used: Stage 1: All six payams were included to represent both pastoralists, agro-pastoralist and fishing communities. Stage 2: 50% of bomas were selected within each payam. Stage 3: Cluster sampling was employed to select villages within bomas. Stage 4: Simple random sampling selected 30% of households in each village. Stage 5: Individuals aged 18+ were selected, alternating between men and women. Six enumerators conducted 100 surveys each, interviewing 402 men and 206 women. Key informants, such as community and religious leaders, were selected based on their leadership positions. Data were gathered from secondary and primary sources: Relevant reports on gender inclusion, livelihood diversification, and climate resilience were reviewed. Primary data collection instruments included; a household questionnaire, key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and life history guides. Observations in payams, markets, churches, and schools corroborated the data. Primary data were transcribed and translated into English. Using NVivo software, responses were coded, tables and graphs extracted, and themes identified through an iterative process. Triangulation ensured data accuracy and provided comprehensive analysis. Data collection tools were developed with SPARC project staff. Enumerators, university students from Bor County, were trained in study protocols, research ethics, and data entry using digital devices. The tools were pre-tested and refined before full data collection. Daily checks ensured quality, and a pilot study validated the tools. Ethical approvals were obtained from Kenyatta University Ethics and Review Committee, the National Commission for Research of South Sudan, and Bor County administrators. Informed consent was verbally obtained, and data were anonymized and securely stored. Findings were validated in a community workshop in November 2023 and disseminated in Bor in May 2024. A workshop targeting policymakers is planned for September 2024. A roundtable discussion will follow to explore implementation, address gaps, and refine recommendations.

Findings

The meaning of empowerment

Societies invest immensely in capacity development in order to ensure that young people successfully navigate the transition to adulthood. This requires some process of empowerment that enables young people to guide themselves and are able to take up their roles, responsibilities and commitments as adults. There are varying understandings of the term; however, current literature indicates that empowerment is considered to be a dynamic process that enables individuals or groups to gain control over their lives by fostering personal agency, self-efficacy, and decision-making capacity (Mouchrek & Benson, 2023) . It involves both internal developments including but not limited to building confidence and competencies as well as external actions such as influencing one's social environment (Martínez et al., 2017). Empowerment can vary across different contexts, including personal growth, healthcare, and community

participation. The concept emphasizes not just acquiring power but also developing the ability to act meaningfully and create positive change in one's life and surroundings.

Scholars underline that empowerment manifests across several dimensions. While authors offer different explications of the concept, it is clear that each of the dimensions contribute to fostering control and agency in different aspects of an individuals' life. According to Martínez et al. (2017) and Zimmerman (1995), key dimensions of empowerment include psychological empowerment, which builds confidence, self-efficacy, and personal mastery, and economic empowerment, which emphasizes financial independence through access to and control over resources. Social empowerment strengthens participation in community life and fosters collective action, while political empowerment equips individuals with the capacity to engage in decision-making processes and influence policies. The authors point out the central role played by education – formal and informal in enhancing critical thinking and social analysis as well as building knowledge thereby empowering individuals to make informed decisions.

A majority of actors have argued that empowering women and girls is critical for achieving sustainable development as it contributes to reducing poverty and fostering inclusive societies. According to the World Economic Forum (2022), gender equality not only uphold human rights but also delivers significant economic and social benefits. Accordingly, the UN Women (2022) empowering women increases workforce participation, enhances education, healthcare outcomes, and boosts national economies. Consequently, bridging the gender gaps could add nearly \$1 trillion to global GDP by 2030.

Studies show that societies that invest in women's empowerment see improvements in health, education, and governance. However, progress remains slow, and many countries are either doing too little or are implementing several scattered disjointed efforts that hardly improve the situation of women and girls. The World Economic Forum (2022), therefore estimates that, at the current rate, it could take more than 130 years to achieve full gender parity globally. This paper argues that one of the most important, yet neglected areas associated with empowerment of women and girls is education yet it is clear that supporting women's access to education contributes to breaking cycles of poverty and promotes well-being at individual, family, community and national levels. Women and girl's empowerment through provision of formal and vocational education accords them choices for the future. In return, this is not only beneficial to women, but it also helps build more prosperous and resilient societies for all as they catalyse and inform action by public- and private-sector leaders in their efforts at development. Engagement in effective decision-making at all levels requires some level of literacy as benchmarking, constant engagement with government and partners would be imperative.

Yet UNICEF <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education> report on girls education estimates that globally 119 girls are out of school with only 49 per cent of countries having achieved gender parity in primary education. At the secondary level, the gap widens: 42 per cent of countries have achieved gender parity in lower secondary education, and 24 per cent in upper secondary education. The situation is even glimpse in Africa as several obstacles among them oppressive gender norms, poverty, early and forced marriages, teenage pregnancies and gender-based violence conspire to deny women and girls opportunities for enrolling and remaining in school as compared to boys. In South Sudan, for instance, an estimated 9% of the total population of women is literate. Of these majority have only attained basic education while only a handful possess a degree. A focus group discussion with students from the Catholic University of South Sudan (CUOSS) revealed that very few girls progress past primary school because many are either married off or are still traumatized to remain in classes after years of war. The next section highlights the education situation in Bor with an eye on girls and women education.

Situation Analysis of Women Education in Bor South Sudan

The picture portrayed by the data on enrolment, retention and completion levels of children in education institutions in South Sudan is bleak with disparities noted between different states. According to the

World Bank and UNESCO Institute of Statistics, the primary school completion rate was at 35 percent in 2011 for boys and 19 percent for girls. In the same year, the lower secondary completion was at 23% for men and 13% for women. Gross enrollment in tertiary education was at 1 percent for men in 2018 versus 0.3 percent for women. According to Dhal (2018), there has been a steady improvement in all the indicators. The author, however; notes, there is an excess of over 1.3 million primary school age children that are out of school.

Data collected on Bor levels of education between 2022 August and the year 2024 reveals that Bor county in Jonglei State is disadvantaged in terms of literacy levels as reflected by data on participants level of education as shown in the graph below;

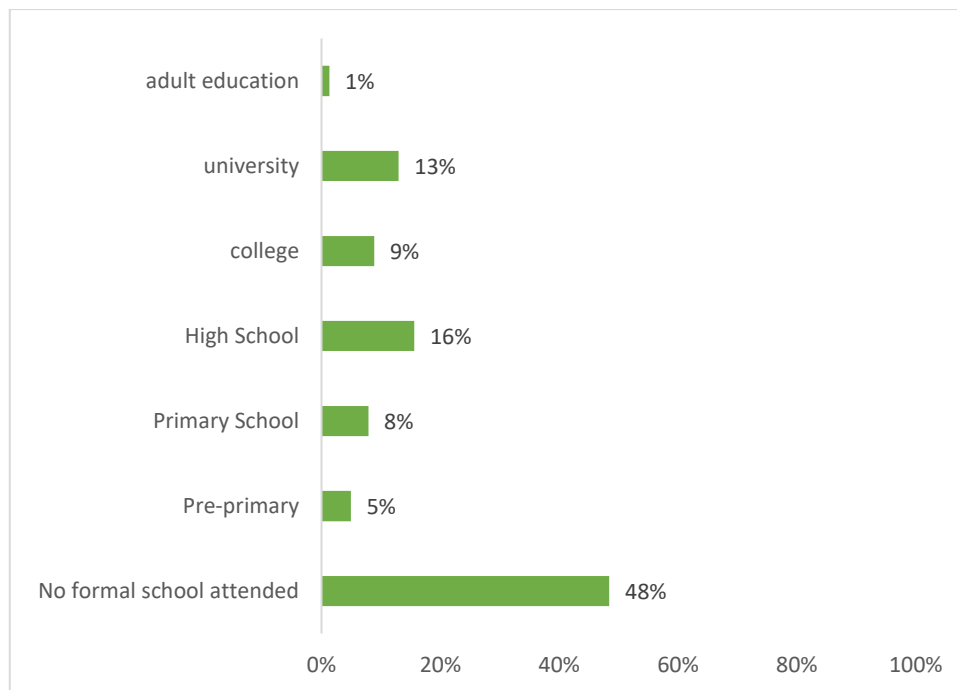


Figure 1: Study participants education levels (N=609) source; KU Sparc

As shown, majority of the participants (48%) had not attended any formal school hence, they had no formal education and that many of these were women. This may be explained by years of conflicts as Jonglei is a conflict-zone pitting among others Dinka, Murle and Nuer. The conflict is majorly resource, governance and ethnic related. And while the Dinka of Bor have all been disadvantaged in terms of access to education, there are also various gender specific barriers to education.

First, the study noted that the Dinka culture and other oppressive gender norms associated with patriarchy are a barrier to girls' access to education. Specifically, Dinka peoples' beliefs around the role and usefulness of girls in the family and community stands in the way of girls' pursuance of formal schooling. Both quantitative and qualitative data indicated that girls are considered useful as they are expected to get married and bring wealth to the family hence the need for them to be properly trained in domestic chores. The figure 2 below shows the extent to which both men and women agreed or disagreed with the statement that girls are a source of wealth to families through marriage.

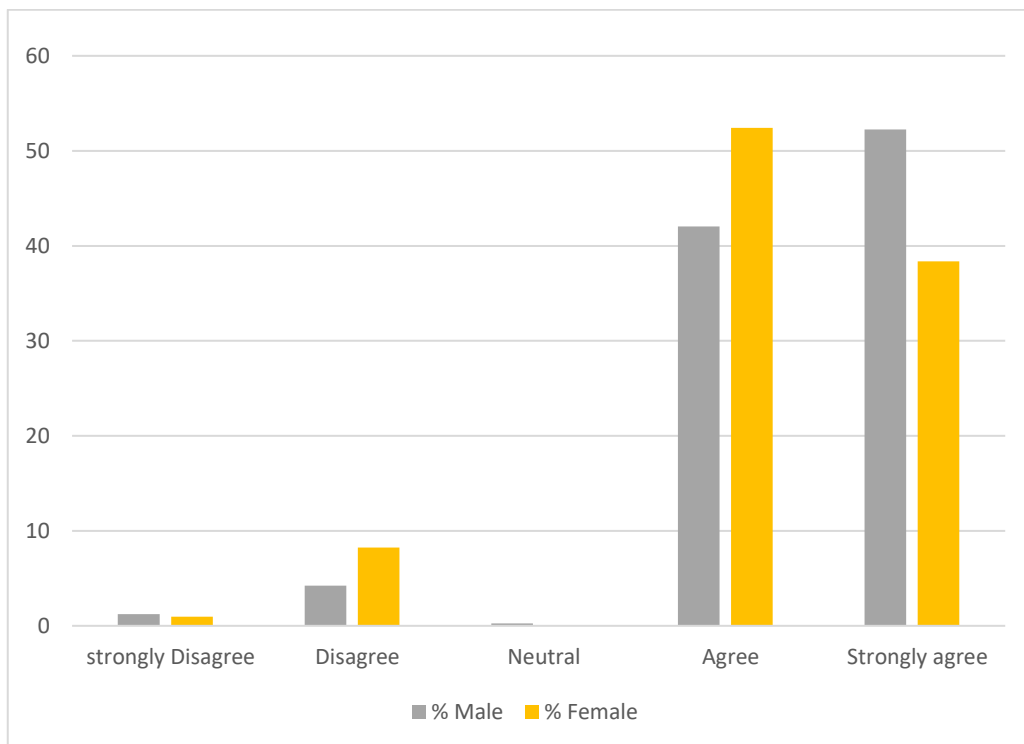


Figure 2: Extent of belief that girls are a source of wealth to their families through marriage

As shown, majority of the Dinka – both women and men either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement on ‘girls as a source of wealth to families through marriage’. This corroborates other studies on marriage and bride price in South Sudan. In this regard, Pospisil et al. (2024) and Tankink et al. (2023) affirm that families often see their daughters as a primary source of income and resources available to them, hence they marry them off as early as possible. In terms of how this belief affects girls’ access to formal education, a key informant (KI) in Kolnyang Payam expounded that;

Capacity to take girls to school is limited due to the cultural belief that girls bring cows to the families upon marriage. Hence, the community has a tendency of marrying off girls at a tender age, (KII, Kolnyang November 2023).

In this regard, Bior (2019) explains that such beliefs feed into the Dinka peoples’ perception that girls do not need formal education as they are destined for marriage. Observably, this is the reality in many patriarchal societies. Scholars therefore, underline that this belief stems from entrenched gender roles and social norms. Moinipour (2022), therefore, notes that in such societies, gender inequality shapes the perception that a girl’s worth lies primarily in her role as a wife and mother, leading families to invest less in her education. The author further argues this that is largely because of the need to control women’s behavior, particularly their sexuality. Hence, early marriage of girls is preferable over schooling to ensure virginity thereby maintaining family honor.

Secondly, referring to Nyal in South Sudan, an Oxfam (2019) report indicates that insecurity and crises associated with conflict, displacement, or natural disasters exacerbate early marriage. The report emphasizes that in such situations, families may perceive marriage as a protective measure as it offers families an opportunity to cope with economic hardships and confers some sort of stability and security for girls. The study noted that marriage is highly valued among the Dinka. Marriages as practiced in many patriarchal societies are however, sites where gender inequalities are constructed, entrenched and maintained. The excerpt below aptly captures this;

Dinka marriages are negotiated and transacted by men and a mother has no authority to say No to these marriages. This is because a woman cannot overrule a man. She was married and therefore, has no authority yet she did not bring any children with her, so they all belong to her husband (Women's FGD, Kolnyang November, 2023)

Observably, women and girls have no say regarding when or who to get married to, because Dinka marriages are men's affairs. These are also central to the economies of these pastoralist communities as transactions are based on the number and quality of herds of cattle given as dowry. Additionally, religious and customary practices perpetuate the belief that formal education is unnecessary for girls beyond what is needed for domestic responsibilities and childbearing.

Conflict situations and associated displacement, recruitment of children into war, early and teenage pregnancies are all barriers that hinder women accessing quality education in Bor. The long distances to school, added responsibilities and fear have left only a handful of girls and women opting to go to school. They prefer to stay home to look after their families while others opt out to accommodate their male kin opportunities to attain education. A key informant interview from Anyidi *payam* noted that educating boys accords them more money from remittances sent by sons who progress to study abroad. Girls who go out of the country often get married and forget their rural homes.

Poverty and associated economic challenges have also contributed greatly to low enrolment and retention rates of girls into schools. Year of war have left Bor poor with few education institutions, dilapidated infrastructure, unemployment and few investment opportunities. And, where investment opportunities exist only a few locals are willing to venture into business due to fear of recurrent conflicts. Coupled with high prevalent poverty levels is access to safety and security kits used by girls during menstrual cycles. Asked why they do not go to schools, some parents from Baidit *payam* reported that it is difficult to walk long distances to school without adequate protection for the girls. 'the protection is both against bandits, rebels and most importantly from their monthly periods'. We need sanitary towels for the girls, but they are expensive'

A major factor mentioned by 67% of female respondents was the lack of role model and parental support. Generally, there are very few women professionals in Bor. These is because only a few of them opt to work in Bor for fear of attacks. Data reveals that after the 2021 floods the few remaining female teachers returned to Juba and they have since been transferred to schools where they feel more secure. It is estimated that only about 4% of the teaching fraternity in Bor are women. The recent flooding challenges have exacerbated the female teacher shortage leaving girls with little support in terms of role modeling and this has in return affected enrollment and retention levels.

The study, however, revealed that perceptions on girl's education are however, fast changing. In an interview young man noted that Sudanese men who have settled in other countries such as Australia, Canada, USA and Europe among others were paying handsome amounts of bride price to marry girls with a good level of education. The student researchers lamented that Dinka men living in foreign countries were taking most of the beautiful educated girls as they are preferred to uneducated ones. This may have influenced the below views shared in an FGD in Bor;

...If educated, a girl fetches a better price. This increases income in the family After marriage the girl's attachment still continues and is not completely severed. Educated girls are therefore better because when there is need back home, she will still help (FGD with men, Bor; November 2023).

Similarly, an elderly woman outlined the benefits of educating girls. She however, lamented that women have no capacity to make the decision to educate a girl rather than marry her off at a tender age. In her words;

... Educating a girl is more beneficial than educating a boy as girls do not forget their parents/home. Boys forget as soon as they get married and have families of their own. An educated girl will get married-

Two kinds of education were proposed; life-long which should be simple in local languages continuous and importantly context specific. For women near fishing villages education fitted to fish should be encouraged and promoted. In pastoral context education should be geared towards animal keeping. This should involve numeracy, colour, use of animal products for diverse use and so on. In communities where farming is the mainstay, capacity building on types and varieties of crops, seeds and vegetables as well as their nutritional value should be emphasized. This should also focus on soil types and the need to plant climate smart agriculture by use of locally produced manure. Complementarity as opposed to competition should thus be encouraged to ensure that farmer-herder conflicts are reduced. After all each of the two relies on products from the other.

In the provision of formal education respondents suggested investment in basic, tertiary and vocational training. Young girls should be encouraged to enroll in school and government measures enforced to ensure maximum transition to tertiary institutions. Development partners should finance programs to drive children out of homes through advocacy. In loans and grants to those who excel should also be provided through an affirmative action process. For teenage mothers and those who drop from school investment in vocational training was mentioned. This was in such areas as hair dressing, tailoring and manual courses.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The central role of education in the economic empowerment of women in Bor, South Sudan, cannot be overstated. Cultural practices such as early marriages, teenage pregnancies, and patriarchal norms severely limit girls' access to education. With 48% of the population lacking formal education, women are disproportionately affected, further entrenching their exclusion from decision-making and public spaces. Despite these challenges, education remains a critical tool for enhancing personal agency, fostering self-efficacy, and promoting informed decision-making. The study highlights the necessity of a comprehensive approach that combines formal education with locally relevant lifelong learning initiatives to enable women's empowerment and broader societal transformation. Based on these, the study recommends; investment in Gender-Responsive Education: Implement targeted programs to address cultural barriers to girls' education, such as early marriage and gender norms. This can be achieved by promoting gender-responsive teaching methods, providing incentives for female teachers to work in conflict-affected regions, and establishing mentorship programs to encourage girls' continued education and, context-specific lifelong learning programs. These programs have to be tailored to the local economic activities, such as fishing and pastoralism. These programs should incorporate basic literacy, numeracy, and vocational training in areas like animal husbandry, fish processing, and climate-smart agriculture, empowering women with practical skills that are aligned with their socio-economic contexts.

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