

Civil War, Gender Norms, and Educational Outcomes in Post-Conflict Societies: Evidence from South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

How do evolving gender norms during conflicts shape educational access, experiences, and outcomes in post-conflict settings? This study explores the complex intersections of gender norms and conflict in shaping the educational outcomes in South Sudan. Drawing on annual data covering enrollment, dropout, completion, conflict events, and conflict fatalities, we construct two additional composite indices of Conflict Intensity and the Gender Norms Index (GNI) and apply multiple linear regression to assess their effects on gendered educational outcomes. The findings reveal that while conflict disrupts schooling broadly, gender norms exert a more decisive influence, particularly on female dropout and completion rates. Conflict intensity aligns with major declines in total enrollment during the peak phases of civil war, but GNI shows stronger predictive power in models of female educational attainment. The additional analyses of time-series and correlation further underscore that structural gender inequality, not conflict alone, accounts for persistent disparities in outcomes in South Sudan. The conclusion is that transforming gender norms is as critical as securing peace in rebuilding equitable education systems in post-conflict societies.

Keywords: Conflict, Gender, Education, South Sudan, Peace building

INTRODUCTION

South Sudan's educational landscape has been indelibly characterized by decades of intense and protracted conflict, resulting in profound challenges to social development and nation-building. The recurrent cycles of violence have not only disrupted educational services and infrastructure but also reconfigured gender norms, often amplifying traditional roles while simultaneously seeding the potential for change. This study is embedded within this tumultuous context, seeking to understand the complex interplay between conflict dynamics and gender norms, and how this nexus, in turn, shapes educational access, experiences, and outcomes.

While the UN Charter on Human Rights recognizes education as a basic human right, its utility permeates beyond the individual to the social realm where it can be instrumentalized into a cornerstone for fostering social cohesion, economic recovery, and peace in post-conflict societies.¹ When South Sudan gained independence in 2011, marking a major milestone in the political struggle for South Sudanese people, there was high expectations that self-autonomy would bring socio-cultural, political, and economic emancipation.² Education, which is an important driver for post-conflict reconstruction through social transformation, protecting children, re-establishing 'normality', and empowering individuals with career paths away from violence,³ was identified as a focal point in the state-building process. For example, during his inaugural

¹ John Ishiyama and Marijke Breuning, "Educational Access and Peace Duration in Post-Conflict Countries," *International Interactions* 38, no. 1 (January 2012): 58–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2012.640211>.

² Speech by President Salva Kiir during independence ceremony, "President Kiir's Independence Speech, July 9th, 2011," PaanLuel Wël Media Ltd - South Sudan, July 12, 2011, <https://paanluelwel.com/2011/07/11/president-kiirs-independence-speech-july-9th-2011/>.

³ Simone Datzberger, Alan Smith, and Alan McCully, "The Integration of Education and Peacebuilding - Synthesis Report on Page 2980

speech immediately after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the war between Sudan and the southern regions in 2005, John Garang emphasized that, “As we move to the new era of peace, the people of Sudan, particularly the war-affected communities, face formidable social and economic problems and also tremendous opportunities. The major problems there require immediate attention to fall in the areas of health, education and water. We must find new ways to rapidly and efficiently deliver these services.”⁴

Indeed, historically, the southern region of Sudan suffered under prolonged periods of civil war, during which educational systems were systematically dismantled. According to a report by the United States International Agency for Development (USAID), at the time of declaration of full independence from Sudan in 2011, approximately 1.4 million children were enrolled in primary schools, 57,000 were enrolled in secondary schools, and only 8 percent of the women in South Sudan were literate.⁵ Furthermore, only 2 percent of primary schools had access to electricity and 32 percent of learning in primary schools was conducted in open-air spaces. However, barely two years into independence, South Sudan was plunged into civil war in 2013 and for the subsequent two decades, violent conflicts became the epitome of political contention, primarily involving two powerful factions; the South Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) led by President Salva Kiir and the Sudan’s People Liberation Movement-In Opposition (SPLM-IO) led by Vice President Riek Machar.⁶

Whereas the political conflict between SPLM and SPLM-IO has received much attention in literature, South Sudan concurrently experienced other forms of protracted inter- and intra-communal violent conflicts.⁷ This combination of civil war and other communal conflicts, sparked one of the most severe humanitarian crises in Africa. In a period of just one year, the Office of the High Commissioner on Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that over 7 million people experienced food insecurity, over 500,000 children were forced out of school, 1.5 million were displaced internally, and 835,000 others were forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries.⁸ But even more significantly for this study, a 2024 report by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) highlighted that more than 2.8 million children in South Sudan were out of school, depicting that the crisis in education has become much worse.⁹

Thus, in this gendered conflict framework for South Sudan, we seek to address a critical gap in our understanding of the mechanisms linking conflict to educational disparities, emphasizing that the effects of conflict are not uniformly negative but are mediated by socio-economic and cultural conditions. The core assumption is that the South Sudan civil war significantly shaped the gender norms, which collectively in turn, have become critical determinants of access to educational opportunities. Specifically, an argument here is that the conflict not only disrupted formal education but also reinforced, altered, and in some cases, challenged traditional gender roles in ways that continue to affect school attendance, literacy rates, and long-term social mobility. The fusion of gender norms into the conflict-education framework is anchored in established gender and conflict studies theories. Gender norms, long seen as static cultural artifacts, are increasingly recognized

Findings from Myanmar, Pakistan, South Africa and Uganda,” (Ulster University, 2016), https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/224242/policy-synthesis-report-final-16.pdf; Christine Smith Ellison, “The Role of Education in Peacebuilding: An Analysis of Five Change Theories in Sierra Leone,” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 44, no. 2 (March 4, 2014): 186–207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2012.734138>.

⁴ Sudans Post, “Today in History: CPA and John Garang’s Full Speech,” *Sudans Post* (blog), January 10, 2020, <https://www.sudanspost.com/today-in-history-cpa-and-john-garangs-full-speech/>.

⁵ USAID, “Education in South Sudan” (United State Agency for International Development, 2013), https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnaec812.pdf.

⁶ Agwanda and Asal, “State Fragility and Post-Conflict State-Building.”

⁷ Jame P. Yiel, “Intra-Communal Violent Conflicts in South Sudan: The Case of Western Nuer 1982-2016” (Masters, Nairobi, Kenya, University of Nairobi, 2021), https://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/160148/Yiel_Intra-communal%20Violent%20Conflicts%20in%20South%20Sudan.pdf?sequence=1.

⁸ OCHA, “South Sudan Crisis Response Plan 2014,” June 14, 2014, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-crisis-response-plan-2014>; OCHA, “An Education System in Crisis,” June 10, 2014, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/south-sudan/education-system-crisis>.

⁹ UNICEF, “Cost of Inaction South Sudan 2024,” June 13, 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/southsudan/reports/cost-inaction-south-sudan-2024>.

as dynamic and context dependent such that the disruption of these norms, generates both setbacks and opportunities. This approach is essential for disentangling the dual effects of conflict, that is, while violence undermines the education system, it also creates a milieu in which longstanding regressive gender norms can either be further entrenched or begin to shift towards greater equity through progressive policy and programmatic interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of gendered lenses in academic research is rooted in a long history of struggle for justice and equality in what has been a hegemonic patriarchal order across multiple societies spanning different continents. Part of this struggle, championed by the work of feminist and social theorists can be traced to the 18th century where pioneer feminist scholars such as Mary Wollstonecraft penned a passionate critique of traditional gender norms and inequities that subjugated women to roles confined within the domestic sphere in society.¹⁰ Highlighting the conspicuous impact of lack of educational opportunities for women, she, for instance, defined marriage as “legal prostitution” because it presented the only viable pathway through which women could secure their economic future. Wollstonecraft thus considered that the establishment of an improved national educational curriculum where males and females could attend together, presented not only an achievable but also progressive path that would make women virtuous citizens and better family members. This work was advanced in the subsequent waves of feminist scholarship in the 20th century such as Simone de Beauvoir who emphasized the role of socialization and cultural norms in shaping gender identities and roles in society as well as Betty Friedan who highlighted the social and psychological impacts of rigid gender norms.¹¹ Others such as Judith Butler became pivotal in moving the gender debate in academia beyond biological determinism, arguing that gender is not an innate quality but rather a set of norms and behaviors that individuals perform. In this context, gender acquired its lens as a social construct.¹²

In conflict research, particularly in the post-World War II era, scholars began to recognize the importance of adopting a gender lens to examine how gender influences experiences of war and peace. This shift was driven by several factors. For instance, women increasingly became involved in activism that amplified their voices in national and international peace and conflict discourses. In Argentina, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo brought to attention how women are impacted by conflict by engaging in non-violent demonstrations against the “Dirty War” that had led to the disappearance of approximately 30,000 Argentines.¹³ Similarly, in the United States, the Women’s Strike for Peace galvanized more than 50,000 women to march in 61 cities to protest against nuclear proliferation and militarism at the height of the Cold War.¹⁴ Beyond activism, multiple post-Cold War research demonstrated the gendered dynamics of conflicts such as the exploitation of women in military economies, exclusion of women from high-level security decision-making processes, how women’s roles during war are shaped by traditional gender norms, intersectionality of gendered norms with diverse social identities, and wartime sexual violence.¹⁵

¹⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman | Online Library of Liberty,” 1792, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/wollstonecraft-a-vindication-of-the-rights-of-woman>.

¹¹ Simone de Beauvoir, Howard Madison Parshley, and Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique (50th Anniversary Edition)*, 1st ed (Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar: W. W. Norton & Company, Incorporated, 2013).

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, First issued in hardback, Routledge Classics (New York London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

¹³ Viviana M. Abreu Hernandez, “The Mothers of La Plaza de Mayo: A Peace Movement,” *Peace & Change* 27, no. 3 (July 2002): 385–411, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0149-0508.00235>.

¹⁴ Matthew Wills, “HUAC versus Women Strike for Peace,” JSTOR Daily, December 7, 2022, <https://daily.jstor.org/huac-versus-women-strike-for-peace/>.

¹⁵ Kerry F. Crawford, *Wartime Sexual Violence: From Silence to Condemnation of a Weapon of War* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017); Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12, no. 4 (July 1987): 687–718, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494362>; Cynthia H. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Second edition (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2014); Michele L. Leiby, “Wartime Sexual Violence in Guatemala and Peru,” *International Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (June 2009): 445–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2009.00541.x>.

Other studies exploring the intersection of conflict and gender revealed that conflicts not only reinforce entrenched gender inequalities, but also shape the same gender roles, with those most impacted being marginalized members of society such as women and girls.¹⁶ Part of this research shows that violent conflicts reinforce traditional gender roles while concurrently opening up new opportunities for women. For example, violent conflicts create opportunities for increased women participation in economic activities as a result of the mobilization of men as combatants, leading to shifts in household dynamics.¹⁷ In these cases, women often take up roles that have traditionally been held by men such as providing family income and making decisions on behalf of the family unit. The shift in gender roles within the family unit has been shown to create new avenues for women to assert their rights, including but not limited to pursuing educational opportunities. Nonetheless, these changes are often temporary and context-dependent, with many women returning to subordinate roles once the conflict subsides.¹⁸

In the context of education, gender and conflict theory has been used to critique how traditional roles hinder female participation. Studies indicate that entrenched social norms often privilege males in formal learning environments, limiting resource allocation, support mechanisms, and opportunities for girls.¹⁹ However, this is exacerbated even further during conflicts whereby the intensity, duration, and type of conflict produce differential impacts on various demographic groups. This is particularly relevant when analyzing gendered experiences: while conflict amplifies vulnerabilities for both genders, the specific ways in which boys and girls are affected differ considerably. During conflicts, schools have often been a key target infrastructure by combatants making them unsafe environments for children due to the increased risk of violence. In South Sudan, 89 children were abducted from a school in 2015 by armed combatants in a region called Malakal, north of country.²⁰ In Nigeria, the kidnapping of the 250 Chibok school girls attracted global attention and campaign for their rescue from Boko Haram.²¹ In Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army is notorious for kidnapping school-age girls into the bushes to be forcefully married off to commanders, leading to their physical and sexual abuse.²² As result of these types of gender-based violence that are deeply rooted in regressive gender norms, some studies show that during and after armed conflicts, some parents often resort to domesticating their daughters or arranging marriages for them at very tender ages out of fear for their safety. Under these circumstances, early marriage and motherhood become a monumental barrier to their access to education.²³

Literature also highlights the long-term effects of conflict on militarization of educational curriculum where conflicts become framed in binary terms while downplaying their complexities and consequences.²⁴ This

¹⁶ Erika Forsberg and Louise Olsson, "Examining Gender Inequality and Armed Conflict at the Subnational Level," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 2 (March 1, 2021): ogaa023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa023>; M. Buvinic et al., "Violent Conflict and Gender Inequality: An Overview," *The World Bank Research Observer* 28, no. 1 (February 1, 2013): 110–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lks011>; Henrik Urdal and Chi Primus Che, "War and Gender Inequalities in Health: The Impact of Armed Conflict on Fertility and Maternal Mortality," *International Interactions* 39, no. 4 (September 2013): 489–510, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2013.805133>.

¹⁷ AolÄin et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁸ AolÄin et al.

¹⁹ Mercy Miyang Tembon and Lucia Fort, eds., *Girl's Education in the 21st Century: Gender Equality, Empowerment and Growth* (The World Bank, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-7474-0>; Sheetal H. Patel et al., "In the Face of War: Examining Sexual Vulnerabilities of Acholi Adolescent Girls Living in Displacement Camps in Conflict-Affected Northern Uganda," *BMC International Health and Human Rights* 12, no. 1 (December 28, 2012): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-698X-12-38>.

²⁰ BBC News, "South Sudan's Struggle for Schools Hit by Abductions," *BBC News*, February 25, 2015, sec. Business, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-31587963>.

²¹ Confidence Uwazuruiki, "Reporting Boko Haram: Framing the Chibok Schoolgirls' Abduction in the Nigerian Press," *African Journalism Studies* 39, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 66–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2018.1471407>; Helon Habila, *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria*, Penguin Special (London: Penguin Books, 2017), <https://www.overdrive.com/search?q=AAA0CDCA-3AAD-45B2-B16F-1D63E7D1AB7A>.

²² Wotsuna Khamalwa, "Violated by Rebels, Violated by Family: Returnee Girls of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda," *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 5, no. 2 (June 28, 2022): 84–94, <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.5.2.727>.

²³ Tembon and Fort, *Girl's Education in the 21st Century*.

²⁴ Sharon Rojas Yacamán and Sven Schuster, "History and Education in Post-Conflict Colombia," *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 2 (March 23, 2022): 16, <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17499.1>.

selective portrayal can foster a simplistic understanding of conflict among students, reinforcing linear perspectives and sentiments and discouraging critical examination of a particular conflict. Studies show that education can also perpetuate divisive perspectives within a fragmented population still reeling from the effects of war. Specifically, textbooks and learning materials are often subject to manipulation and politicization, serving as tools to sustain or even exacerbate existing inequalities.²⁵ In the Southern Cameroon, the education system curriculum is a key conflict driver to group sentiments among Anglophone Cameroonians. One study finds that in Cameroon, despite attending schools and taking exams based on the Anglophone curriculum, many Southern Cameroonians upon graduation have to contend with the reality that their diplomas and certificates do not mean much in supporting their efforts for gainful employment because of the dominance of the French Cameroon education system and curriculum in public service.²⁶

Despite the rich body of work exploring the effects of conflict on education and the role of gender norms, several gaps remain. First, many studies have tended to analyse quantitative data and qualitative narratives separately. While these approaches have yielded significant insights, they often fail to capture the full complexity of the interdependent relationships between conflict dynamics, gender norms, and educational outcomes. The absence of an integrated mixed-methods approach leaves a critical gap in understanding how numerical trends relate to lived experiences. Second, the majority of existing quantitative studies focus on aggregate outcomes—such as overall enrolment or dropout rates—without sufficiently dis-aggregating data by gender and region. This approach can obscure important differences in how boys and girls are impacted by conflict, as well as the role that local sociocultural factors play in mediating these effects. There is a clear need for more granular analysis that combines rigorous statistical modelling with qualitative case studies to reveal the heterogeneity of impacts across different contexts.

Conceptual Framework

The trajectory of education in conflict-impacted societies is deeply intertwined with systemic social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics. In South Sudan, decades of violent conflict have intensified these intersections which have partly been reflected in the erosion of the structural foundations of the education system. For instance, in addition to the structural damage and resource limitations that conflict brings, subtler yet equally powerful forces such as entrenched gender norms exert profound influence on who accesses education, under what circumstances, and to what end. According to feminist theory, gender disparities in societies are sustained by gender norms which impose certain societal expectations for appropriate behaviour for women and men. As such, given that conflict and education are gendered experiences, women and men tend to have differential experiences of conflict and post-conflict conditions.²⁷ Norms anchored on patriarchy disproportionately expose women to fewer resources and opportunities, which only worsen further during conditions of conflict. For example, under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, rural areas have been found to practice certain cultural norms that undermine female education beyond primary school whereas even in more stable periods, many families cite safety concerns and social stigma as reasons to prioritize boys' schooling.²⁸ Beyond

²⁵ Catherine Vanner, Spogmai Akseer, and Thursica Kovinthan, "Learning Peace (and Conflict): The Role of Primary Learning Materials in Peacebuilding in Post-War Afghanistan, South Sudan and Sri Lanka," *Journal of Peace Education* 14, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 32–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400201.2016.1213710>.

²⁶ Elizabeth Bifuh-Ambe, "Harnessing the Transformational Potential of Education to Meet National and Global Developmental Needs of Southern Cameroons: Re-Thinking Theory and Practice," *Theory & Event* 23, no. 2 (April 2020): 445–63, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2020.0020>; Billy Agwanda, Israel Nyaburi Nyadera, and Ugur Yasin Asal, "Cameroon and the Anglophone Crisis," in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-11795-5_115-1; Billy Agwanda and Ugur Yasin Asal, "The Anglophone Problem in Cameroon: The Change from Crisis to Conflict, and a Possible Way Forward to Resolution," *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 21, no. 1 (2021): 32.

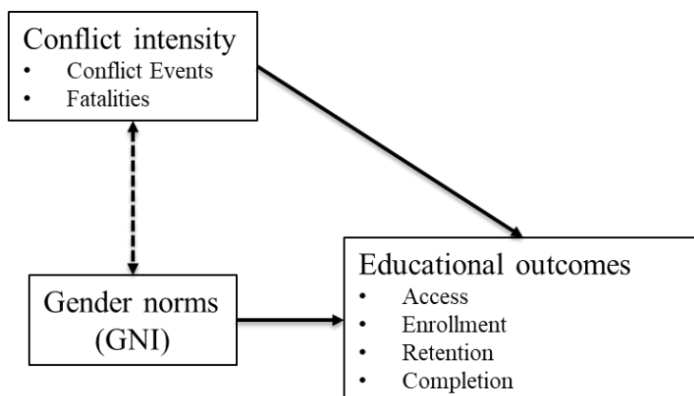
²⁷ Lori Handrahan, "Conflict, Gender, Ethnicity and Post-Conflict Reconstruction," *Security Dialogue* 35, no. 4 (December 1, 2004): 429–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010604049521>.

²⁸ Robert Wm. Blum et al., "Coming of Age in the Shadow of the Taliban: Education, Child Marriage, and the Future of Afghanistan From the Perspectives of Adolescents and Their Parents," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 64, no. 3 (March 2019): 370–75, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.09.014>; Abdul Qadim Mohammadi et al., "Female Education Ban by the Taliban: A Descriptive Survey Study on Suicidal Ideation, Mental Health, and Health-Related Quality of Life among Girls in Afghanistan," *Journal of Public Health* 46, no. 3 (August 25, 2024): e439–47, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdae111>.

the binary of male or female, feminist theory has also provided vital critical insights on intersectionality of identities that further compound the challenges of access to education in conflict-impacted contexts.²⁹

While feminist theory foregrounds the power dynamics embedded in gender, conflict theory extends this analysis by examining how structural disruptions of conflict such as displacement, and institutional collapse, reshape or reinforce the gendered constraints in education. According to a World Bank study, conflicts have prolonged impacts on human capital, and these are seldom gender-neutral.³⁰ From this point of view, the hardships that emerge during and after conflict have a disproportionate impact on those already marginalized and who also bear a heavier burden. Yet other studies have argued that given that more often it is the men who go off to fight, such dynamics might produce entrenched militarized masculinities in the society that reinforce the existing gender hierarchies.³¹ However, conflict theory also brings an important alternative dimension, that is, rather than just focusing on the destructive aspects of conflicts, it also allows for the envisioning of change in the sense that conflicts can also upset traditional social orders that potentially open spaces for renegotiation of gender roles. Thus, collectively, this dual framework provides a holistic lens to explore the complex intersection between conflict, gender norms, and education, whereby feminist theory reveals who is marginalized and why, while conflict theory explores how and under what conditions those marginalizations are intensified or contested during and after conflict. To make sense of this duality, this article explore a framework that positions conflict intensity and gender norms as key determinants of educational outcomes in South Sudan (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Conceptual Model Diagram Description



Source: Author

This posit that conflicts shape educational outcomes through direct and indirect pathways, with gender norms acting as a key mediator in the process. First, conflict intensity has a dual effect in impacting educational outcomes, through the direct disruption of education infrastructure, and second, by shaping gender norms. Some studies show that high levels of violent conflicts over sustained period of times lead to closure of schools, loss of critical human resources such as teachers, and the displacement of learners. For example, conflict in the Occupied Palestinian Territories after the October 7th attack on Israel, severely impacted the education system in localities such as Gaza where an estimated 658,000 children were completely cut-off from accessing education due to insecurity and the destruction of over 95.2 percent of school infrastructure.³² Second, conflict also indirectly shapes educational outcomes by shaping gender norms. According to a report by Oxfam, during South Sudan's protracted conflict, many families resorted to the practice of child marriage as a coping

²⁹ Vidya Diwakar, "Interrogating Dynamic, Intersecting Inequalities in Education amidst Armed Conflict," *Research in Comparative and International Education* 18, no. 4 (December 2023): 528–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17454999231212714>.

³⁰ Buvinic et al., "Violent Conflict and Gender Inequality," February 1, 2013.

³¹ Myra Lourdes Buvinic et al., "Violent Conflict and Gender Inequality: An Overview," World Bank, World Bank, 2013, <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/en/270811468327340654>.

³² OCHA, "Education Overview in 2024: The State of Education in Gaza and the West Bank 'Current Realities and Future Priorities,'" February 14, 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/education-overview-2024-state-education-gaza-and-west-bank-current-realities-and-future-priorities-february-2025>.

mechanism, viewing marriage as protecting girls or a source of bride wealth.³³ Consequently, in some regions such as Nyal, approximately 70 percent of the girls were married before the age of 18 years. This also means that once married, all or a majority of these girls drop out of school.

Thus, in my analysis on South Sudan, it delve into this framework to test for three assumptions. First, that conflict intensity has a negative association with educational outcomes. Second, progressive gender norms positively impact educational access. Third, the intersection between conflict intensity and gender norms moderates educational outcomes. In other words, whereas conflict generally has a negative influence on education, its magnitude and direction may be moderated by prevailing gender norms. For instance, in societies with patriarchal norms that sustain educational inequalities, conflict may deepen such disparities. However, in societies with more flexible gender norms, conflict may yield important gains such as more autonomy, and developmental or humanitarian support for marginalized groups.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the relationship between conflict intensity, gender norms, and educational outcomes, this study adopts a longitudinal correlation design focusing on the years between 2011 and 2024. Given the limitations of complete statistical datasets on South Sudan, both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used to identify patterns and test the association between the different variables over time to capture the dynamic transitions potentially due to political, cultural, and humanitarian interventions on education outcomes. Importantly, this research design does not seek to make an explicit claim of causality, rather, show how this study's foci (conflict intensity, gender norms, and educational outcomes), co-evolve in complex environments underpinned by fragility. In other words, this study is not seeking to prove cause and effect. The focus is to examine how conflict, gender norms, and education outcomes change together over time in South Sudan. In doing so, this approach enables a thematic mapping of how direct violence shapes normative culture and institutional recovery, particularly in education during and in post-conflicts conditions in South Sudan.

The dataset used in the analysis of this study comprised ten key variables comprised of year, number of conflict events, fatalities, Gender Norms Index, male and female dropout rates, male and female completion rates, Gender Parity Index (GPI), and an interaction term developed by multiplying two independent variables (Conflict Events \times Gender Norms). These variables were selected on the premise of their theoretical significance. The quantitative dataset comprises panel and cross-sectional data compiled from relevant sources such as the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, and the Ministry of Education of South Sudan. Descriptive statistics were first applied to identify the underlying trends before the authors subjected the dataset to a ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis to explore the predictive power of conflict and gender norms on educational outcomes through the relationship between the independent variables (conflict intensity and gender norms) and dependent variables (enrolment, completion rates, and dropout rates). The model applied takes the following formula:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Conflict Intensity}) + \beta_2(\text{Gender Norms Index}) + \epsilon_i$$

Where, Y_i is the outcome of interest in year t . This includes measurements such as dropout rates, or school completion rates. β_0 represents the constant term, β_1 the effect of conflict intensity, β_2 the effect of gender norms, and ϵ the error term in year t .

To quantify conflict intensity in a given year, we developed a composite conflict intensity index (CII) by combining data on conflict fatalities and conflict events into a single standardized metric using the formula:

$$\text{Conflict Intenstiy} = \frac{\text{Conflict Fatalities}_t}{\max(\text{Conflict Fatalities})} + \frac{\text{Conflict Events}_t}{\max(\text{Conflict Events})}$$

³³ Oxfam, "Conflict, Poverty and Hunger Driving Child Marriage in South Sudan," Oxfam International, February 18, 2019, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/conflict-poverty-and-hunger-driving-child-marriage-south-sudan-0>.

Similarly, for the gender norms index, we computed a standardized composite measure combining gender-disaggregated educational indicators such as enrolment, completion, and dropout rates that partly reflect underlying societal attitudes toward gender dynamics such as equality. The resultant composite GNI was used as a proxy for the normative shifts in gender roles during the years under study as they manifest access, persistence and outcomes in formal education. Thus, higher GNI values reveal more gender-equitable outcomes in education, whether in terms of closer gender parity enrolment, higher female completion, or lower female dropout rates. The formula used was:

$$GNI_t = \frac{Z(\text{Female Completion Rate}_t)}{Z(\text{Male Completion Rate}_t)} + Z(\text{Gender Parity in Enrolment}_t) - Z(\text{Female Dropout Rate}_t)$$

Where Z denotes the z-score standardization of variable, X, across all years (mean = 0, std = 1).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The dataset spanning the years 2011-2023, contains a variety of variables that reveal important insights into the interplay between conflict, gender norms, and educational outcomes (see Table 1). Our descriptive statistics show that on average, gender parity in enrollment of 0.75 with a standard deviation of 0.09, reflects a steady but incomplete transition towards parity in education access. In the early years of conflict outbreak and escalation (2013-2015), the minimum value of 0.64 suggests substantial disparities during periods of intense instability, while the peak of 0.88 shows that strides toward equitable enrolment have been achieved in more recent years due to targeted policy interventions or shifts in social attitudes. Dropout rates have however exhibited a consistent gender parity with female and male dropout rates averaging 32.45 percent and 28.58 percent. More importantly, the significant variability observed in female and male completion rates of 3.8 percent and 1.67 percent respectively, suggest that education for female students is more sensitive to the impacts of conflict or evolving gender norms than for male students. The composite metric of gender norms index oscillates between positive and negative values, a key reflection of a context in flux, that is, although traditional gender norms persist in South Sudan, they are continually contested particularly through peace-building and humanitarian interventions.

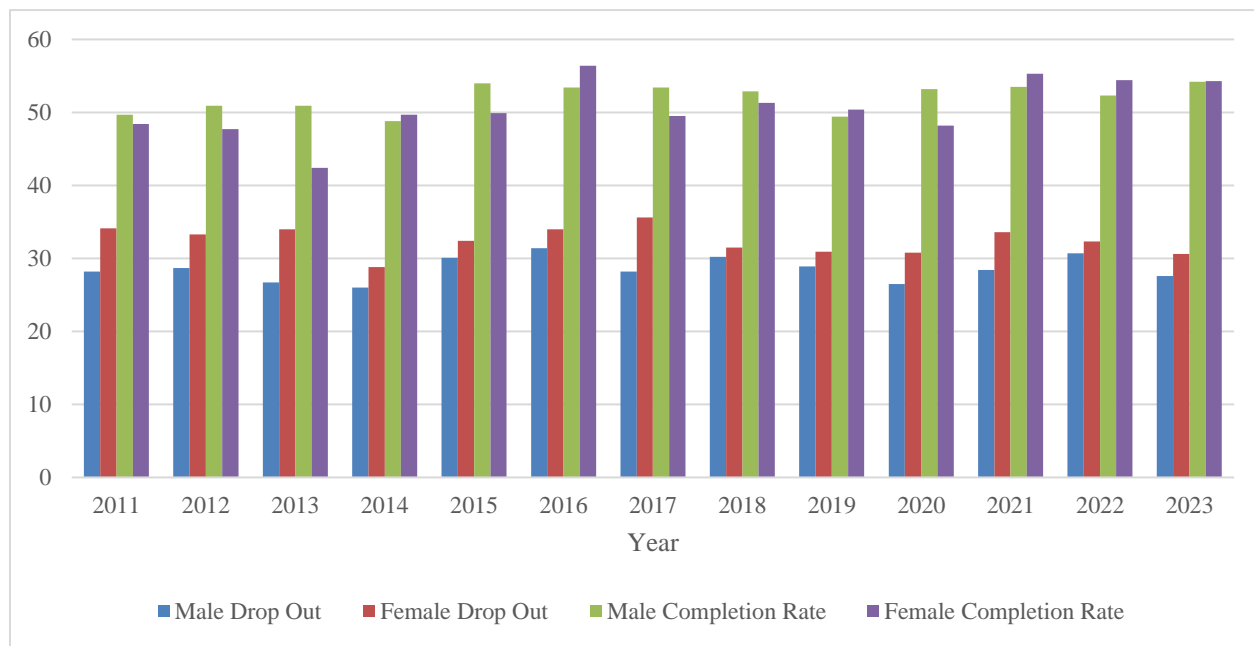
Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the data (2011-2023)

	Count (Years)	mean	std	min	0.25	0.50	0.75	max
Gender Parity	13	0.75	0.09	0.64	0.67	0.75	0.83	0.88
Male Drop Out	13	28.58	1.67	26.00	27.60	28.40	30.10	31.40
Female Drop Out	13	32.45	1.88	28.80	30.90	32.40	34.00	35.60
Male Completion	13	52.05	1.87	48.80	50.90	52.90	53.40	54.20
Female Completion	13	50.61	3.80	42.40	48.40	49.90	54.30	56.40
GNI	13	0.00	0.54	-0.76	-0.16	-0.04	0.19	1.08
Conflict Events	13	859.31	524.29	51	516	845	1040	1742
Conflict Fatalities	13	3435.77	1303.46	1716	2451	3675	4094	6254
Conflict Intensity	13	0.52	0.20	0.16	0.38	0.50	0.68	0.80

Source: Author (2025)

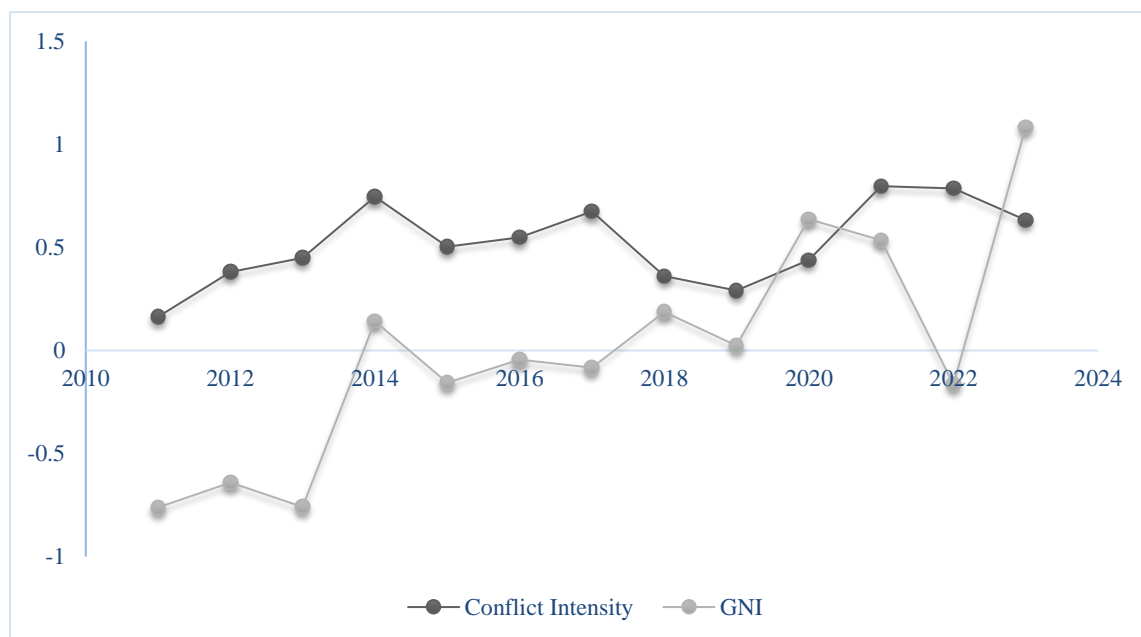
To better understand how these quantitative shifts occurred over time, two integrated visualizations were developed. The first combines education indicators—gender parity, dropout rates, and completion rates—showing their interrelated evolution (see Figure 2) while Figure 3 overlays conflict intensity with the GNI, to trace how spikes in violence correlate with shifts in societal attitudes toward gender.

Figure 2. Education Outcomes in South Sudan (2011-2023)



Source: Author (2025)

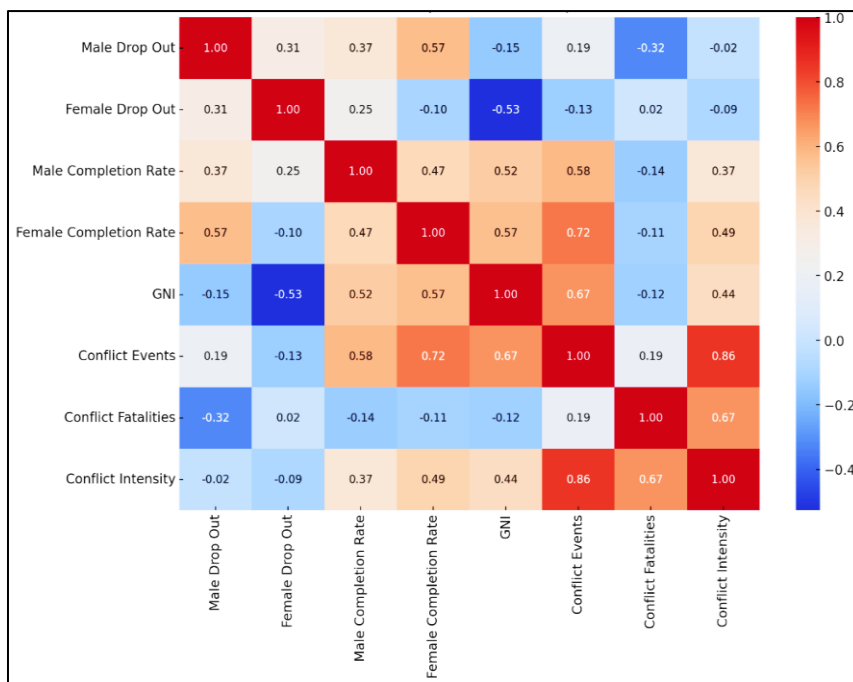
Figure 3. Conflict Intensity and Gender Norms Index (2011-2023)



Source: Author (2025)

These descriptive trends lay the foundation for the phase II analysis of causal or correlational relationships (see Figure 4). The results of the correlation matrix further reveal important insights on the relationship between conflict, gender norms and educational outcomes. The conflict intensity variable shows a moderate positive correlation with the dropout rates of both male and female students, $r = 0.49$ and $r = 0.55$ respectively, with female students the most impacted in conflict zones. This is further reinforced by findings on the relationship between conflict intensity and completion rates, with a positive but weak $r = 0.37$ for male students and $r = -0.49$ for female students, highlighting that whereas male students are perhaps encouraged to persist in education to completion, conflict not only drives dropout rates but also significantly hinders the likelihood of female students completing school.

Figure 4. Correlation Matrix: Conflict, Gender Norms and Education Outcomes



Source: Author (2025)

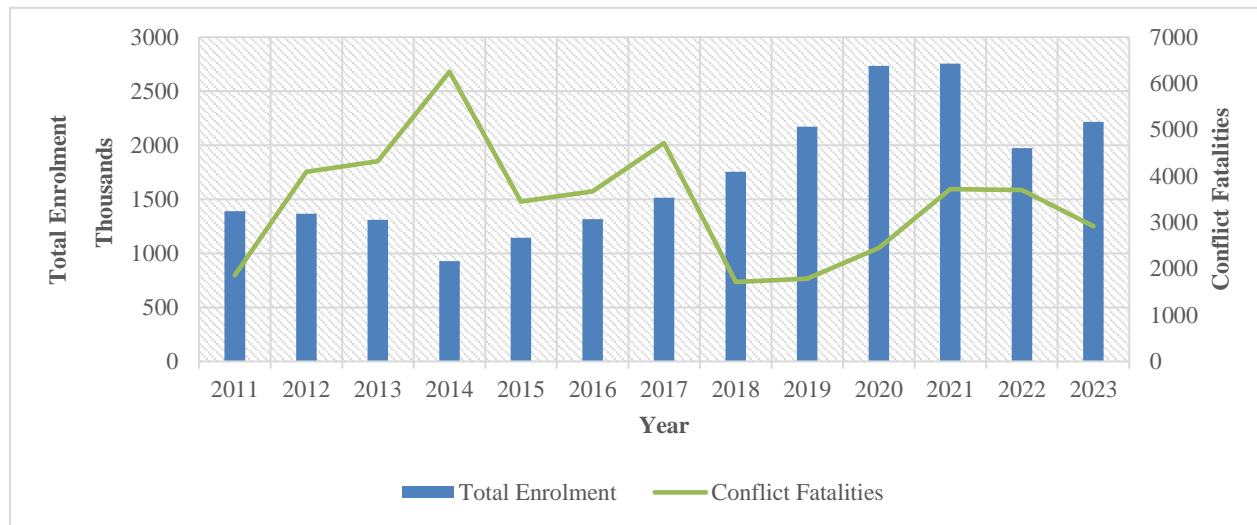
Interestingly, dataset also shows that conflict events have a strong positive correlation with female completion, $r = 0.72$ and male completion, $r = 0.58$, which may on the surface appear counter-intuitive. While this finding can be evaluated as unexpected, it is nonetheless not an anomaly. I argue that this could be due to increased humanitarian intervention and educational programming that is triggered during certain high-activity periods such as peace negotiation phases or in the immediate post-conflict transitional periods, thereby, temporarily bolstering schooling outcomes. In other words, the impact of conflict on educational outcomes is not uniform but varies depending on intensity, type, and policy responses. The impact of gender norms measured through the GNI also indicates a consistent and intuitive relationship with education as evidenced by the positive correlation, $r = 0.57$ and $r = 0.52$ for female and male completion rates respectively. This means that progressive gender norms support education for both male and female students. However, the negative correlation between gender norms and female dropouts, $r = -0.53$, reifies that egalitarian attitudes help minimise school attrition especially for female students who face disproportionately more barriers to education. In general, the analysis of the correlation matrix demonstrates that although conflict disrupts education especially for female students, progressive gender norms can provide a buffer and enabling role in not only educational access, but also completion, making it an important lever for policy during post-conflict reconstruction.

The statistical findings of this analysis align with the historical and policy based developments that have been witnessed in South Sudan since the conflict begun in 2013. Indeed, when the country was plunged into conflict in December 2013, there was a sharp escalation in conflict events and fatalities especially during the first three years spanning 2014-2017, with major impacts recorded in the states of Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity, leading to a drastic reduction in total education enrollment levels and a peak in the conflict. However, when the first major peace agreement was signed in August 2015, the Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), a sharp decline in conflict was witnessed and total enrollment in education began to increase (see Figure 5). During this period, South Sudan endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in June 2015 to safeguard education infrastructure from military use, even though schools largely remained targets in the civil war.³⁴ Perhaps even more importantly, humanitarian and peace building efforts by organizations through

³⁴ Save the Children International, "South Sudan: A Guide to Understanding Safe Schools Declaration Guidelines and South Sudan People's Defence Forces Code of Conduct," April 29, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-guide-Page 2989>

government partnership with international organizations, provided important buffers for the impact of conflict and gender norms on educational outcomes.

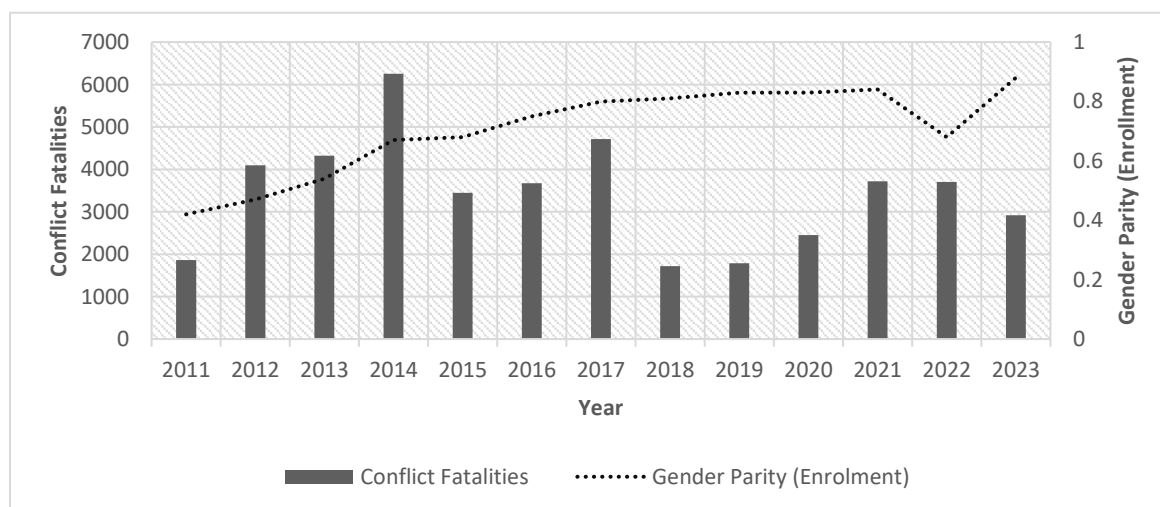
Figure 5. Total Enrollment versus Conflict Fatalities in South Sudan (2011-2023)



Source: Author (2025)

In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, donor intervention led to the establishment of programs such as the Girls' Education South Sudan (GESS) (2015-2018) which provided cash transfers, sanitary towels, and food rations to female students between grade five in primary schools through to the four years of secondary school education. Moreover, in collaboration with other international partners, the Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI) also launched several policy and programmatic interventions to mitigate the impacts of the civil war on education through gender-responsive interventions such as the Girl's Education Strategy (2015-2017), the National Action Plan to End Child Marriage (2017-2030), Accelerated Education Policy, and General Education Policy (2017-2027).³⁵ These efforts coincide with the gradually but steadily improving gender parity from about 0.4 in 2011 to 0.9 in 2023 (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Conflict Intensity and Gender Parity in Education Enrollment (2011-2023)



Source: Author (2025)

understanding-safe-schools-declaration-guidelines-and-south.

³⁵ Ministry of General Education and Instruction, "The General Education Strategic Plan, 2017-2022" (Juba, 2017), https://www.globalpartnership.org/node/document/download?file=sites/default/files/general_education_strategic_plan_south_sudan_2017-2022.pdf.

When the Revitalized Agreement on Conflict Resolution in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed in 2018, a transitional government was subsequently established, bringing relative stability in the country from the previous iterations of a full scale war between SPLM and SPLM-IO. However, the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), in 2020 and natural disaster emergencies such as floods in 2021, created new schooling emergencies. For example, schools in South Sudan were closed for approximately 14 months between March 2020 and May 2021. Data captures the impact of these emergencies on education in general through statistics on total enrollment where at first, we witness a near stagnation in enrolment between 2020-2021, then a subsequent sharp decline in enrolment in 2022. According to a report by the World Bank, the prolonged disruption between 2020-2021 had a substantial impact on education, particularly for female students, some of whom experienced teenage pregnancies or were forced into early marriages partly driven by the tough economic conditions that forced many families to turn to dowry as source of income.³⁶

Nonetheless, amidst these challenges, the transitional government adopted the General Education Strategic Plan (2017-2022) which was finalized in December 2018, as its official education sector road-map. Other international partners such as UNICEF, EU, and Global Partnership for Education (GPE), determined to leverage the relative peace created by the 2018 R-ARCSS peace process, continued to bridge the development and humanitarian needs. For instance, GPE approved a USD 35.7 million grant to cover the years 2019-2023 by scaling up previous interventions such as the rehabilitation of more than 2000 schools and enrolling an additional 330,000 children to school.³⁷ The government on the other hand, also increased budgetary allocations to the education sector from a previous 6 percent of to 12.5 percent of the national gross domestic product in 2023 to support the free education policy at primary and secondary levels.³⁸ The MoGEI also launched the second phase of the National Girls' Education Strategy (2018-2022) while other international institutions established new programs such as Oxfam's Building Resilience in Crisis through Education (BrICE) (2018-2022).³⁹ These efforts, in the midst of sporadic conflicts, reflect an encouraging trend. The data show that in general, enrolment across primary and secondary levels has improved, and the gender parity gap is steadily closing towards parity. Nonetheless, challenges remain especially regarding the completion rates with is slightly just above 54 percent for both male and female students. Aside from those already enrolled, millions of other South Sudanese children continue to lack access to education. For example, according to UNICEF, more than 2.8 million children were out of school in 2024, while challenges of proper sanitation, schools, and lack of adequate and well trained teachers continue to undermine South Sudan's education sector.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that addressing educational needs and disparities in conflict zones demand dual-pronged approaches from both local and national level in order to effectively mitigate conflict-related disruptions while simultaneously fostering the supportive progressive gender norms that is needed for sustainability in guaranteeing education rights. Part of this work continues in collaboration of both the government of South Sudan and other international partners, leading to the development of different policy anchored interventions that are sensitive to the complex intersection of conflict, evolving gender norms, and education. The empirical findings have not only shown that these interventions have a positive impact in safeguarding education gains during sporadic bouts of violence, but that there are also improvements in educational outcomes, albeit minimal. This is an important finding as it reiterates the imperative for international donors to continue, and even scale-up their programmatic interventions in South Sudan by working closely with both the national government, grass root organizations, and local communities.

³⁶ The World Bank, "Empowering Girls and Women in South Sudan" (World Bank Group, 2022), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099022003272356464/pdf/P1777360fd8e170ef09358084576fae4a8d.pdf#:~:text=Female%20learners%20are%20more%20vulnerable,In%20a%20qualitative%20study>.

³⁷ Global Partnership for Education, "Education in Time of Conflict: South Sudan Pursues Quality Education as Peace Moves Forward," 2020, <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/education-time-conflict-south-sudan-pursues-quality-education-peace-moves-forward>.

³⁸ Gabriel Mekbib, Mabor Tur, and Joseph T. Awad, "Educating Girls: The Key to a Better Future for South Sudan," GPEKIX, October 3, 2023, <https://www.gpekix.org/blog/educating-girls-better-future-south-sudan>.

³⁹ Mekbib, Tur, and Awad; Manyang David Mayar, "Millions of South Sudanese Children Remain out of School," Voice of America, March 1, 2023, <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/millions-of-south-sudanese-children-remain-out-of-school/6985365.html>.

Moreover, cognizant of the different systems that anchor the education sector, interventions should not only focus on improving the enrolment and retention of students to different levels of learning by providing incentives such as cash transfers but also ensure that there is basic infrastructure to support education. This includes additional humanitarian intervention in the construction of schools and associated infrastructure, training of teachers, and development of competency-based curriculum that aligns with the contemporary national development needs of South Sudan. Indeed, as South Sudan embarks in its post-conflict reconstruction and state building, education remains a critical pillar for stability given its utility as a powerful tool for social empowerment and sustainable development.

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