

# “Education Is My Mother and Father”: The “Invisible” Women of Sudan

AMANI EL JACK

## Abstract

*Education plays a significant role in informing the way people develop gender values, identities, relationships, and stereotypes. The education of refugees, however, takes place in multiple and diverse settings. Drawing on a decade of field research in Kenya, Sudan, Uganda, and North America, I examine the promises and challenges of education for refugees and argue that southern Sudanese refugee women and girls experience gendered and unequal access to education in protracted refugee sites such as the Kakuma refugee camp, as well as in resettled destinations such as Massachusetts. Many of these refugees, who are commonly referred to as the “lost boys and girls,” did not experience schooling in the context of a stable family life; that is why they often reiterate the Sudanese proverb, “Education is my mother and father.” I argue that tertiary education is crucial because it promotes self-reliance. It enables refugees, particularly women, to gain knowledge, voice, and skills which will give them access to better employment opportunities and earnings and thus enhance their equality and independence. Indeed, education provides a context within which to understand and make visible the changing nature of gender relationships of power.*

## Résumé

*L'éducation joue un rôle important dans l'obtention d'information sur la façon dont sont acquises les valeurs, les identités, les relations et comment se développent les stéréotypes relatifs aux genres. L'éducation des réfugiés, par contre, s'effectue dans des milieux multiples et variés. En m'appuyant sur des études de terrain effectuées pendant une décennie au Kenya, au Soudan, en Ouganda et en Amérique du Nord, j'examine les promesses faites aux réfugiés en matière d'éducation de même que leurs difficultés*

*et j'argumente que les femmes et les filles réfugiées provenant du Sud du Soudan connaissent un accès inégal à l'éducation basé sur leur genre dans des camps de déplacement prolongé, comme celui de Kakuma, ainsi qu'à des destinations de réinstallation, telles que le Massachusetts. Nombre de ces réfugiés, communément surnommés « enfants perdus », n'ont pas eu droit à des études scolaires dans une situation familiale stable. C'est d'ailleurs pourquoi ils réitèrent souvent le proverbe soudanais « Ma mère et mon père forment mon éducation. » Je soutiens que l'éducation supérieure est primordiale, car elle favorise l'autonomie. Elle permet aux réfugiés, en particulier aux femmes, d'acquérir des connaissances, une voix et des compétences qui leur donneront de meilleures possibilités d'emploi et de meilleurs revenus, ce qui contribue à leur égalité de fait et à leur indépendance. En effet, l'éducation fournit un contexte au moyen duquel on peut comprendre et mettre en lumière la nature changeante des rapports de pouvoir entre les genres.*

## Introduction

My parents were killed when I was five years old. The Arab government bombed our village in south Sudan, so I walked with a group of boys and girls in the Sahara. We lived in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya for 10 years before we resettled in Boston ... Education is my mother and father.<sup>1</sup> It tells me what is right and wrong and shows me the way. I am so sad that I lost my parents' love and care but I am happy to gain an education. We survived the most horrible past, but now with education we will strive for a better future.<sup>2</sup>

Over the last decade, a growing number of scholars have focused on refugee education,<sup>3</sup> but little attention has been devoted to the gender dimensions of refugee education, particularly at the tertiary level. This paper addresses the

promises and challenges of all levels of education for southern Sudanese refugee women and children. I argue that refugee women and girls experience unequal access to education prior to their displacement from south Sudan, in protracted refugee camps such as Kakuma,<sup>4</sup> and in the United States. However, education has become both a means to survival and a driving force motivating them to succeed.

This study is based on qualitative ethnographic data that I gathered from two rounds of fieldwork. The first round was conducted between 2001 and 2003 with forty-five southern Sudanese refugee women, men, and children in Kenya and Uganda. The research participants were predominantly Dinka and Nuer refugees who were forced to flee southern Sudan and reside in refugee camps for periods of time ranging from two to ten years.<sup>5</sup> The second round of fieldwork was conducted in March 2011 in Boston, Massachusetts, with ten southern Sudanese students (five females and five males) who were resettled from the Kakuma refugee camp to Massachusetts.<sup>6</sup> At the time of the interviews, the participants in this second group were all enrolled at various universities and community colleges in Massachusetts, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. This group of young resettled refugees is commonly referred to as the “lost boys” of Sudan, and has received great attention in the international media.<sup>7</sup> However, little attention has been paid to the plight of the thousands of “invisible girls” who fled Sudan along with the boys and shared distinct and gendered experiences of both displacement and education.<sup>8</sup>

To better understand the invisibility that the southern Sudanese women and girls experienced and their unequal access to education in both Kakuma and Massachusetts, I draw on feminist perspectives on male dominance and women’s invisibility. One use of invisibility derives from the work of feminist scholars such as Josephine Beoku-Betts.<sup>9</sup> Beoku-Betts’s analysis of male dominance emphasizes that African women are marginalized because of patriarchal values and institutions that discriminate against women and render them invisible. In the context of this study, I use the term “invisibility” to point to the failure to recognize the experiences of southern Sudanese women and girls during processes of conflict and militarized displacement, especially during their protracted refugee experiences in the Kakuma refugee camp, and their resettlement experiences in the United States. Invisibility and male dominance are indeed mutually reinforcing.

Historically, southern Sudanese men and boys have often been privileged over women and girls through differential rights and resources. In south Sudan, boys are generally given preference over girls. From early childhood, girls and boys are socialized to perform strictly defined gendered behaviours and roles. For instance, a famous Nuer saying

that was frequently repeated by the people I interviewed is, “The man should be the ruler of the home, and his wife should unquestioningly act according to his will.” That explains why, in the Dinka and Nuer communities, male children are given preference over females. A sixty-year-old southern Sudanese woman I interviewed in Nairobi in 2001 explained,

Back home, male children were preferred to females because they were considered to be the heirs of the family lineage. It is believed that girls would get married off to other families while boys carry and preserve the family’s name and heritage. Therefore, in my village [in Eastern Upper Nile] there was a lot of pressure on pregnant women, from their families and in-laws, to give birth to male children. Not bearing boys is often considered to be the woman’s fault. That is why some men feel justified in marrying a second wife [or more wives] in order to give birth to a male successor.

As the above quotation illustrates, patriarchal notions of femininity and masculinity are central in shaping such gendered meanings, identities, and institutions. Children are taught to respect and obey their parents and the elderly, particularly male figures. Females are obliged to obey their male relatives when they are young, and such obedience is automatically transferred to their husbands and male in-laws upon marriage. A key traditional practice in these marriages is the bridewealth payment by the groom’s family, in cattle as well as in cash.<sup>10</sup> Marriage means that the bride’s family relinquishes control over her reproductive and productive ability and grants it to her husband and his family in return for bridewealth. The concept of bridewealth allows men the right to control the labour and productivity of women and children and renders the women invisible.<sup>11</sup>

To reiterate, invisibility and male dominance help explain the unequal power relations within the southern Sudanese communities. I argue that historically, gender perceptions have been defined in ways that privilege male-dominated structures while, at the same time, subordinating women. In the next section, I examine how women’s marginalization has been exacerbated as a direct result of armed conflicts in south Sudan and protracted refugee experiences in the Kakuma camp. As a result, the so-called “lost boys” of Sudan have remained visible in the camps, as well as in the United States, while the girls’ needs have become invisible and their voices silenced.

### ***Protracted Refugee Situations and Southern Sudanese Refugees***

In Sudan, forced displacement is not merely a consequence of armed conflicts; it has repeatedly been used as a deliberate weapon of war.<sup>12</sup>

For instance, between 1955 and 2005, armed conflicts between successive governments in northern Sudan and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) in the south produced over 4.5 million refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). The armed conflict in southern Sudan stemmed from deeply entrenched forms of oppression, inequality, and exclusion. Gender, social, economic, and political inequalities have exacerbated the conflict.<sup>13</sup> In 1983, the government of Sudan (GOS) used scorched-earth strategies to forcibly displace the Dinka and Nuer communities from their territories in southern Sudan. For instance, the northern government targeted and burned villages in order to secure the territories around the oil fields, which intensified the displacement of millions of south Sudanese refugees, including the people I interviewed. The conflict altered the demographic and gender aspects of the southern Sudanese society. It is estimated that the armed conflicts have resulted in the death of over 2.5 million southern Sudanese and skewed the population structures so that young persons under age fifteen make up 53 per cent of the population. Moreover, because so many men were either killed or displaced during the armed conflict, females are estimated to comprise about 55 per cent of the population, as of 2005.<sup>14</sup> One young southern Sudanese woman in Boston described her experience:

Our village in south Sudan was bombed at night. We panicked. My parents ran in one direction and my brother and I walked with a group of boys and girls for many months in the Sahara. It was a very long walk. We had no food or water. We were forced to drink urine and eat leaves in order to survive. Wild animals attacked us. It was very hard. Many of the boys and girls died while walking. We had to leave their dead bodies lying in the forest and continued to walk. We were very tired and had no energy to bury that many dead bodies. Animals and vultures gathered in the sky to eat the dead bodies. I still have nightmares when I remember our journey.<sup>15</sup>

All of the women, men, and children I interviewed have survived long and extremely dangerous experiences of displacement. They have all endured the violent experiences of political upheaval, have suffered the death of loved ones, and have experienced social, economic, and cultural exclusion. However, Sudanese women and girls, who have already been marginalized by the structural inequalities of male-dominated Sudanese society, have been more adversely impacted by displacement as well as by ensuing protracted refugee situations.

In July 1992, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) established the Kakuma refugee camp in northwestern Kenya to host 16,000 so-called “lost boys”

fleeing militarized violence in southern Sudan.<sup>16</sup> While about 3,000 young women and girls accompanied the boys on their traumatic journeys, their refugee experiences have barely been documented within the Kakuma camp or beyond.<sup>17</sup> One woman in Boston put it this way:

I guess the displaced girls are invisible because of cultural tradition. The people in charge of the refugee camps tended to connect unaccompanied girls to whatever foster families they could find. Boys were left independent. As for us, we had to stay with other families in the camp and were forced to clean the houses, cook, do the laundry, and fetch water. As a result many girls could not attend the camp schools or benefit from any of the sport activities like the boys. In my heart, I still resent the reasons why the UNHCR focused all its attention on the boys and not us. I was orphaned too.<sup>18</sup>

As Wendy Chamberlin, the former United States Deputy High Commissioner for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, states, “The discrepancy among adolescents bears out refugee testimony that young girls from the Kakuma camp are being sold into marriage to take advantage of high bridal prices.” Because of patriarchal discrimination against women, entrenched cultural practices, and extreme poverty within the camp, the guardians who were entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the young girls exploited them. Before these people were displaced, these communities used to rear and breed cattle, cultivate crops, and brew and sell traditional liquor. They were traditionally agriculturalists and agro-pastoralists who did not have the resources to survive in confined long-term refugee situations. Becoming protracted residents in refugee camps meant that they experienced restrictions on their movement, the erosion of their socio-economic status, and the denial of their basic human rights.

Women and young girls in Kakuma had to assume more gendered responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings and the elderly, along with the burdens of other domestic work. These added responsibilities have both short-term and long-term impacts on the welfare and future of female household members. Furthermore, the gender roles that women and girls were forced to take often exposed them to gender-based violence and even death. Many of the women and girls were raped only because they were performing the traditional gendered duty of collecting firewood.

The main dilemma of protracted refugee camps such as Kakuma, as Crisp argues, is that they are “usually to be found in peripheral border areas of asylum countries: places which are insecure, where the climatic conditions are harsh, which are not a high priority for the central government and for development actors, and which are consequently

very poor.”<sup>19</sup> Hyndman addresses the invisibility of refugee women and men by arguing that refugee camps “remove evidence of human displacement from view and contain ‘the problem’ without resolution, as non-communities of the excluded.”<sup>20</sup> Humanitarian assistance to refugees in long-term situations has primarily focused on emergency short-term food relief, temporary housing, and medical services. The UNHCR, the host government in Kenya, and the international NGOs have implemented “long-term care-and-maintenance programs” that pay little attention to the refugees’ self-reliance and economic security.<sup>21</sup>

The UNHCR has attempted to find “durable solutions” for southern Sudanese refugees. According to the UNHCR, durable solutions include local integration in the receiving countries, voluntary repatriation to their countries of origin if these countries become secure, or resettlement to another country.<sup>22</sup> The search for durable solutions is important because such attempts “can be a tangible expression of international solidarity and a responsibility sharing mechanism, allowing States to help share each other’s burdens, and reduce problems impacting the country of first asylum.”<sup>23</sup> These efforts seek to provide international protection and meet the special needs of individual refugees whose life, liberty, safety, health, or other fundamental rights are at risk in the country where they have sought refuge. They also have the potential to challenge existing and inequitable social and cultural norms, such as gender inequalities. However, the latter depends upon the ability of international protection agencies and NGOs to recognize the gender relations of a specific situation.

Thus, in 2000, the United States government granted special approval for approximately 4,000 southern Sudanese to come to the United States, only 89 of whom were Sudanese young women, despite the fact that 3,000 young women had been admitted to Kakuma in 1992. These women became invisible and under-represented in resettlement figures and programs. Harris, DeLuca, Matheson, and McKelvey investigate the causes of the invisibility of the southern Sudanese women and argue that there has been a global emphasis on the refugee and resettlement experiences of the “Lost Boys of Sudan,” while the Sudanese young women seem to remain “lost,” predominantly in the eyes of the media and the international community.<sup>24</sup>

In an article entitled “Where are the ‘Lost Girls’?” McKelvey argues that these women were twice forgotten: first in the camps, and again in the resettlement processes. She further states that international aid workers prioritized the boys’ resettlement through “psycho-social programs and kept a list of those who were being counseled. The girls weren’t included—presumably, they were being cared for by their foster families. UNHCR officers later relied on the

‘psycho-social program’ ledgers to determine who should be recommended for resettlement.” One of the women I interviewed in Boston realized that she would have to be very strategic to make herself “visible” and put it this way:

When I heard that the resettlement opened for boys, I sat down in the middle of the night and asked God to help me get out of the camp. But I didn’t know where to start as I knew that the community or the family that I was staying with would never allow me to go to the United States. But I wanted to come to the USA to pursue my education and build a decent life for myself.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Gender Dimensions of Southern Sudanese Education***

Education plays a significant role in reproducing gender values, identities, relationships, and stereotypes; in schools, children construct their ideas about femininities and masculinities. Institutions such as the school, the family, the community, refugee camps, and national and international actors play a key role in forming gender perceptions and stereotypes. South Sudanese women experienced unequal access to education in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times, and they continue to do so today both in and out of refugee camps, and even in resettlement in the United States.

Historically, in south Sudan, educational and religious institutions facilitated by missionaries and colonial administrators imposed Western models of education and reinforced patriarchal gender values. Mama argues that in an effort to “civilize the savages,” in many African societies, British legal and administrative colonial systems altered traditionally accepted gender values and roles and instead applied very strict perceptions of femininity and masculinity.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the British colonizers (between 1898 and 1956), influenced by the patriarchal values that existed in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, introduced to southern Sudan a “Victorian ideology of domesticity” and encouraged the doctrine of separate gendered work and domestic spheres for women and men. In southern Sudan, the methods and philosophy of missionary education aimed at training men to dominate public affairs while women were given training to prepare them for domestic life that rendered them invisible. At first, the British colonizers discouraged education for both women and men throughout Sudan.<sup>27</sup> But when Sudanese were needed to serve in the junior ranks of the colonial civil service, the British prioritized the education of boys and men, tailoring education to enforce traditional gender roles and values. Female primary education was only initiated in 1907 in northern Sudan and three decades later in the south.<sup>28</sup> In both the south and north, girls’ schools had lower academic standards than boys’ schools

and focused primarily on training girls in stereotypical gendered activities such as cooking, baking, home crafts, and needlework. Women’s education and training were oriented toward preserving patriarchal norms and values. The aim was to prepare women to be ideal housewives who would then take better care of their husbands and children and positively influence the next generation.<sup>29</sup>

One aspect of the British colonial rule’s prioritization of the education of boys over girls was the establishment of boarding schools in the south, which enrolled small numbers of sons of Christian families and privileged chiefs who valued the importance of Western knowledge.<sup>30</sup> However, the majority of those in the southern Sudanese male-dominated society preferred to socialize their children to value and herd cattle, which they viewed as a symbol of prestige and status. Only the families that had few cows allowed their boys to attend these schools. The majority considered schools to be a place to deposit children who were too lazy, recalcitrant, or incompetent to be trusted with the family cattle. As Chanoff argues, “Sending a child to school meant branding him with the shame of his father’s disrespect or his poverty.”<sup>31</sup>

Yet Southern Sudanese attitudes towards women and children’s education have not always been negative. For instance, anti-colonial nationalism in Sudan equated the liberation of the nation with the education of communities and the emancipation of women.<sup>32</sup> This is why the early supporters of Sudanese women’s rights were nationalist elites: secular, progressive men who situated the women’s question at the centre of the anti-colonial national struggle. In fact, a few privileged, educated women were mobilized to join the national liberation struggle. Although it was not a mass movement, these women managed to challenge institutional discrimination against women and campaign for equal rights for women in the public sphere. This positively impacted a few southern Sudanese women who managed to enter the formal job market and earn salaries. For example, Anne Itto Leonardo received a doctorate from the University of Khartoum in the 1970s and was employed by the Regional Ministry of Agriculture in the south, as well as the University of Juba. Referring to her earlier belief that women could not achieve in the masculine public sphere, she states, “I worked myself out of this femaleness ... I also saw myself as [being as] strong as a man.”<sup>33</sup>

In the 1970s and early 1980s, access to education led to some improvement in the lives of southern women. A small group of white-collar female workers emerged in the south. Acquiring higher degrees of education enhanced women’s confidence, as Leonardo’s statement illustrates. However, due to the armed conflict in the 1980s, thousands of southern Sudanese women, men, and children were forced to

flee their homeland and become refugees in the Kakuma camp. Many of the women interviewees in my fieldwork in 2001–3 reiterated that protracted refugee situations had rendered them vulnerable again because an increasing number of women and girls (as well as some of the boys) were not able to access all levels of education at the Kakuma camp. However, unlike in the past, when most of the southern Sudanese communities did not endorse education for either boys or girls, education is now viewed by at least some women and men as a way to empower women, as well as the larger community. For the people I interviewed, education appeared to be of paramount importance and was the subject of their aspirations and hopes for a better life and a better future.

### ***“Education Is My Mother and Father”***

Most of the southern Sudanese refugees that I interviewed during my fieldwork in Kenya, Uganda, and the United States stressed that education is essential to rebuilding the lives of refugees, both children and adults. Education enables refugees, particularly women and girls, to gain the knowledge and skills that would allow them to engage in public spaces and paid employment, and thus to enhance their equality and independence. Education has been identified by my interviewees as a priority because it provides youth with a sense of hope and reduces the risk of their engaging in dangerous militarized activities. For these Sudanese women, men, and children, education is important mainly because it promotes self-reliance by building human capacity that can constitute a solid foundation for post-conflict reconstruction and development. As one of the so-called “lost boys” explains:

We started a new life in the Ethiopian refugee camp, where I went to school for the first time in my life ... We learned under a tree. No shelters, clothing, books, pens, or chalkboards. Our teachers used charcoal to write on old cardboard boxes. We used to level the sand on the ground where we would trace the letters and numbers ... A few years later at Kakuma camp, I began to learn English and Kiswahili, in order to communicate with the other refugees. I began to see education as necessary for my survival in the world. Neither dust nor hunger nor diseases would stop us.<sup>34</sup>

In refugee camps, education is often viewed as the “fourth pillar” of humanitarian assistance: just as important as the other three pillars of food, shelter, and health services. Crisp and Talbot point out that education “provides opportunities for students, their families and communities to begin the post-war healing process”; it also helps them learn the skills and values they will need “for a more peaceful future.”<sup>35</sup>

In the Kakuma refugee camp, UNHCR and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have established early education daycare centres and preschools, as well as ten primary schools and a high school. However, these educational facilities face major funding challenges, which compromise their ability to provide refugee students with essentials such as textbooks, uniforms, and school supplies. Wright points out the reasons why education is so sparse in the Kakuma camp, and of such poor quality. To begin with, the schools in Kakuma are inadequately funded and lack parental and community support. The educational quality is low because the camp has few trained teachers, its pedagogy and curriculum content are inadequate, and the environment is not conducive to learning. Moreover, those in the camp see no prospect for higher education there (see also Wright and Plasterer, this issue). In combination, these factors greatly compromise the opportunities for education in the camp.<sup>36</sup> Yet looking back on the experience, one of my interviewees in Boston in 2011 emphasized the strength of the desire to learn:

I started going to school in Kakuma . . . . Our classroom was under the trees, and the chairs we sat on were rocks; our books were the floor, and our pens and pencils were our index fingers. This was from the first grade until secondary school in the camp. In 1995, the UN provided us with a very few exercise books; over 10 students shared each book, taking turns. We lacked almost everything, including water to drink and food. Despite all these struggles we were very determined to have an education.<sup>37</sup>

While both boys and girls in the camps lack many of the essentials for learning, the girls experience gendered inequities due to family responsibilities and cultural norms. For example in 2010, Wright documents that fewer women and girls are enrolled at all levels of schooling within the Kakuma camp. Historically, when their resources were limited, Sudanese families tended to send their sons to school, not their daughters, and this privilege carried over into the refugee camp. As a younger southern Sudanese woman in Boston recalls,

More boys were enrolled in the school in Kakuma camp because in our culture girls are traditionally expected to do more of the household duties. So we had to work inside the homes and also had to go to the distribution center to get the rations. We also had to wake up early in the morning to fetch water because water came three times a day, around 5 am, noon, and 6 pm. So, for girls to make it to school they would have to wake up at 4 in the morning so that they could be the first in the line for the water. Because of this many girls missed classes . . . Also, I had to skip many days of school when I had my monthly periods because we

had such poor hygiene in the camps. So, doing well at school in the camp was very hard, but we did it!<sup>38</sup>

Many of the women I interviewed, like the one above, said their domestic labour was needed in the camp, so they did not have enough time to study and as a result could not compete equally with the "lost boys." As a result, the so-called "lost boys" of Sudan were relatively privileged over the "invisible girls" through the differences in the rights they had at Kakuma and the possibilities for education granted by local, national, and international actors. The level of education they attained in the camps determined whether or not these lost boys and girls could access and benefit from tertiary education when resettled to the United States, as I illustrate in the next section.

### *Tertiary (Post-Secondary) Education*

The university students I interviewed in Boston in March 2011 reflected on their experiences of primary and secondary education in the Kakuma camp and emphasized that even though it was limited, the camp education provided them with a solid foundation to pursue higher education opportunities in the United States.<sup>39</sup>

Giles states that unlike other forms of refugee education, post-secondary education can "open new spaces that do not currently exist and that can be transformative." She further articulates that for refugees located in precarious situations such as protracted refugee sites, there is a direct relationship between higher education and voice, and that the "denial of access to higher education contributes to the creation of inequalities in people's abilities to make choices."<sup>40</sup> In their study of the gendered barriers to educational opportunities for resettled Sudanese refugees in Australia, Hatoss and Huijser concur with Giles in arguing that higher education creates wider access for newly resettled refugees, particularly for women, to access paid employment and enhance their independence.<sup>41</sup>

A gender sensitive, holistic approach to the resettlement of refugees which incorporates all levels of education, particularly higher education, would allow for the full integration and the enhancement of the well-being of newly settled refugees. In the United States, since the 2001 resettlement of the roughly 4,000 "lost boys" and fewer than 200 "lost girls," only a small number of them have managed to access post-secondary education. The United States Office of Refugee Resettlement indicated that as of 2004, approximately 20 per cent were enrolled in high school, 38 per cent were in associate degree programs, and 7 per cent were in bachelor degree programs.<sup>42</sup> While there is a lack of gender disaggregated statistics, Sudanese women and men experience education differently and unequally. My

research indicates that the Sudanese refugee women have gender-specific needs during the resettlement and education processes that are different from the needs of their male counterparts. These stem from limited secondary education in the camps, conflicting gender expectations and roles, and language barriers, all of which put them at an increased risk for marginalization within the larger Sudanese refugee community.

In Massachusetts, the ten southern Sudanese students who I interviewed are enrolled at various universities and colleges, specializing in majors such as nursing, conflict resolution, economics, and education.<sup>43</sup> They indicated that despite the “interrupted” and substandard secondary level of education that they completed at the Kakuma camp, they had been able to access and benefit from tertiary education and to adapt to their new life in the United States. The interviewed students are highly motivated to take full advantage of their acquired knowledge and skills to better themselves, organize collectively, and contribute to their community. One of the interviewed men explains:

I am engaged in the National Lost Boys/Girls Association which works to unite the southern Sudanese and bring awareness to our issues here in the United States, as well as in Sudan. We are trying to lobby the United States government to pay more attention to the problems facing our people ... Education is giving us the skills and resources to change our lives and help others.<sup>44</sup>

The participants’ engagement in community organizations in Massachusetts has from their own perspectives strengthened their self-esteem and allowed them to develop social and political awareness. For some southern Sudanese women, in particular, higher education is enabling them to make significant contributions to their households and communities and to alter some of the oppressive gendered, social, and cultural traditions that were previously taken for granted. This is demonstrated by the testimony of a southern Sudanese woman who managed to attend high school in Boston and earn a scholarship to study at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. She has become involved with the Sudanese Education Fund, based in Arlington, Massachusetts, which helps the southern Sudanese access educational opportunities.<sup>45</sup> She states,

I am a volunteer with the Sudanese Education Fund, as well as with the Southern Sudanese Youth Association of Massachusetts. I joined these organizations in order to support the Sudanese youth and create a sense of community ... I am graduating this year and plan to go back home to reunite with my relatives in south Sudan and also to help alleviate the suffering of our people ... We owe

it to those who are still there. I am happy to be a voice for their hopes, struggles, and dreams.<sup>46</sup>

In fact, in July 2007, the United States Congress passed the “Return of the Lost Boys and Lost Girls of Sudan Act,” a program aimed at assisting southern Sudanese refugees with the cost of voluntarily returning and helping in the reconstruction efforts of their country. One eligibility requirement for participation is that the individual commits to returning to southern Sudan for a period of not less than three years for the purposes of contributing knowledge gained through higher education and professional experience in the United States.<sup>47</sup> Since the Republic of South Sudan declared its independence on July 9, 2011, ending fifty years of militarized armed conflict between northern and southern Sudan,<sup>48</sup> this program has gained importance in the minds and hearts of Sudanese refugees in the United States, including those I interviewed.

However, the majority of the resettled southern Sudanese refugees in the United States still encounter serious obstacles in accessing higher education, and as a result, most of these young people are not able to benefit themselves or their home country from the 2007 Return Act. The students I interviewed in Massachusetts described a range of challenges. To begin with, as noted above, the education they attained in the Kakuma camp was limited. One of the participants indicated that her high school diploma from Kakuma was devalued to the equivalent of an eighth grade education in the United States, when she applied to college. In addition, many of the participants struggled with language barriers and lack of English language competence. They all had rich oral languages and many were fluent in more than one language, but that language background was of little benefit to them when they applied to colleges in the United States, where high literacy in English was required. Many encountered discrimination and racism both within and beyond the university environment, especially as African refugees in the United States. As one interviewee put it, “We do not belong either among the white Americans or the African American communities.” And yet, others faced challenges accessing scholarships in the United States.<sup>49</sup>

While all the participants experienced these challenges as they attempted to access secondary and/or post-secondary education in the United States, the women and girls experienced education in particular gendered and unequal ways. In the United States, the capacity of women and men to benefit from higher education is limited by a number of gender, social, cultural, and other related factors. Although as yet there is no comprehensive study of the educational pathways of southern Sudanese refugees resettled in the United States, Hatoss and Huijser, in their examination of

resettled southern Sudanese refugees in Australia document greater risk for women as they face increased cultural and linguistic obstacles.<sup>50</sup>

Gender intersects with other power relations such as social status, language, educational backgrounds, and trauma to impact women's access to higher education. Some of the women I interviewed in Massachusetts lack family and community support as well as child care services. They experience these barriers mainly due to their gendered responsibilities of raising their children and performing household chores as set by the cultural norms of their community, which hinder their full access to higher education. Some of the women who experienced gender-based violence suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and need essential support services after their resettlement. As a result, fewer girls than boys manage to sustain their university education in Massachusetts. As one southern Sudanese woman told me in Boston recently,

Even here in Boston, the majority of the southern Sudanese women are illiterate because they did not have access to education as children in south Sudan or in the camps. And, some still shy away from going to adult education programs in the United States ... Also, even today, some men oppose girls' education and have a low opinion of educated girls. They worry that educated girls will be culturally changed and westernized. They fear that they will learn about women's rights and become Americanized.<sup>51</sup>

While there are many gendered barriers, higher education provided the women I interviewed with tangible gains such as employment, income, and some degree of access to the amenities of everyday life in the United States (e.g. cars, cellphones, etc.) which are essential for their independence. As one of the interviewees articulates, "... and until recently, even women themselves did not recognize the importance of education as a window that opens many opportunities for enhancing our lives."<sup>52</sup> Another woman stated that in the past, traditional gender roles were respected and valued by both women and men. Transcending these defined gender roles often resulted in conflict within the family. However, "nowadays, traditional roles are rapidly changing both within our households and in the community."<sup>53</sup>

Transformation through education may involve complex negotiations, confrontations, and reconfigurations of power relations within the home, extended family, community, refugee camp, and national and transnational arenas. For the southern Sudanese women I interviewed, access to education has shaken some of the social and cultural perceptions that previously shaped their lives. These shifts in gender values and relationships are documented in instances when some of the participants' husbands supported the

education of their wives by assuming some of the women's chores within their households in order to allow them to go to classes. In her study of Sudanese refugee women in Africa and the United States, Edward explains that within countries of resettlement, the renegotiation of gender roles often leads to a shift in power relations between men and women. She articulates that women often assumed greater roles outside the home; they also asserted "greater involvement in decision-making, particularly on financial issues, an area which has been the sole domain of men in the past."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, higher education has provided a context within which to understand and make visible the changing nature of gender values among southern Sudanese refugees. More importantly, it emboldens women to re-evaluate and challenge oppressive gender relationships of power, as well as others' perceptions of them.

To reiterate, the interview data from the resettled refugees in Massachusetts demonstrate the promises and the challenges of higher education, particularly for women. *Despite the difficulties, the southern Sudanese students I interviewed in Massachusetts* are highly motivated to learn and take full advantage of their higher educational opportunities. They have already been positively affected by their access to higher education and their exposure to new cultural norms and values. They are now using their newly acquired knowledge and skills to gain economic independence and challenge patriarchal values and structures within their households, communities, and beyond.

In conclusion, I have argued in this paper that southern Sudanese refugee women and girls experienced gendered and unequal access to education prior to their displacement from Sudan, in the Kakuma camp, and in the United States. A systemic lack of education has historically constrained the economic and social activities of southern Sudanese women and men. Meanwhile, the knowledge, skills, and capabilities that both young men and women have gained in the Kakuma refugee camp,—despite the limitations in access and quality of primary and secondary education—as well as their access to tertiary education after their resettlement to the United States, have enabled them to enhance their well-being in their own eyes and make significant contributions to their communities. The participants' testimonies describe what has been affirmed by almost all of the Dinka and Nuer women and men that I interviewed, in the camps and in resettlement situations: education is, indeed, a means for making the invisible visible and for empowering both women and the larger community.

## NOTES

1. Many of the southern Sudanese refugees, particularly young girls and boys, often reiterate the proverb, “Education is my mother and my father” (in Dinka, *Pioc yen e ke ama ku awa*) because they did not experience schooling in a stable family or educational setting when they were young. This mirrors similar statements made to authors such as David Chanoff, “Education Is My Mother and My Father,” *American Scholar* 74, no. 4 (2005): 35–46.
2. Interview with a southern Sudanese woman, age twenty-eight, Boston, March 2011.
3. International Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE), *The Multiple Faces of Education in Conflict-affected and Fragile Contexts* (Paris: INEE UNESCO, 2010); James H. Williams, “On School Quality and Attainment,” in *Learning for a Future: Refugee Education in Developing Countries*, ed. J. Crisp, T. Christopher, and D. B. Cipollone (Geneva: UNHCR, 2001), 84–108; Jaya Earnest et al., “Are Universities Responding to the Needs of Students from Refugee Backgrounds?” *Australian Journal of Education* 54, no. 2 (2010): 155–74; Laura-Ashley Wright, “The Case of Refugee Education in Kenya: An Analysis of Kakuma and Dadaab” (MSc dissertation, Wolfson College, Oxford University, 2010).
4. The Kakuma Camp was established by the UNHCR in northwestern Kenya in July 1992 to accommodate 16,000 teenage Sudanese refugees fleeing violence in southern Sudan. There were and still are significant numbers of youth (both boys and girls) heading households in the camp, and they are commonly referred to as Sudan’s “lost boys” and “lost girls.” Since 1992, the camp has expanded to house over 86,000 refugees, diverse populations from Sudan, as well as other African refugees from surrounding conflict zones. The camp is divided into three sections, each subdivided into various zones. The Sudanese refugees constitute 75 per cent of the overall refugee population. The majority of the southern Sudanese refugees are members of the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups.
5. Some of the research participants took refuge in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in northwest Kenya while others were in different refugee settlements such as the Rhino Refugee Camp in northern Uganda. I asked about the impact that a protracted refugee situation has had on their lives, as well as the role that institutions such as the UNHCR and INGOs played in changing their experiences as refugees, as well as their gender roles and relationships.
6. The data-collecting tools included in-depth semi-structured interviews that aimed at exploring the prior educational experiences of participants in the camps, as well as current experiences in the United States.
7. The phrase “lost boys and invisible girls” was explored by Katarzyna Grabska in “Lost Boys, Invisible Girls: Stories of Sudanese Marriages across Borders,” *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 17, no. 4 (2010), doi: 10.1080/03057920701582624; Tara McKelvey, “Where Are the ‘Lost Girls?’” *Slate*, October 3, 2003, accessed August 10, 2011, <http://www.slate.com/id/2089225>; Ishbel Matheson, “The ‘Lost Girls’ of Sudan,” *BBC News*, 7 June, 2002, accessed August 10, 2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/2031286.stm>.
8. The label “lost boys and girls” is contested because many of the southern Sudanese refugees are now adults in their twenties and thirties. Moreover, the so-called lost boys and girls affirm that they were never “lost” but instead were compelled to leave their homeland in south Sudan due to the armed conflicts in the 1980s and to become refugees in Ethiopia, Kenya, and now the United States and Canada, as well European countries.
9. Josephine Beoku-Betts, “Contested Representations: Western Perceptions of African Women in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries,” in *Readings in Gender in Africa*, ed. A. Cornwall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Josephine Beoku-Betts, Marianne Bloch, and Robert Tabachnick, *Women and Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Power, Opportunities, and Constraints* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998); Caroline Moser and Linda Peake, *Seeing the Invisible: Women, Gender and Urban Development* (Major Report No. 30, Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, Toronto, 1995).
10. “Bridewealth” is a payment by the groom’s family to finalize the marriage alliance between the two families.
11. Grabska, “Lost Boys,” 481.
12. Refugees are often regarded as being in a protracted situation when they have lived in exile for more than five years, and when they have no immediate prospect of finding a durable solution to their plight by means of voluntary repatriation to their home country, local integration in the host country, or resettlement to the West.
13. Amani El Jack, “Gendered Implications: Development-Induced Displacement in the Sudan,” in *Development’s Displacements: Ecologies, Economies and Cultures at Risk*, ed. P. Vandergeest, P. Idahosa, and P. Bose (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007); Amani El Jack, *Gender and Armed Conflict: Overview Report* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, 2003).
14. El Jack, “Gendered Implications,” 62.
15. Interview with southern Sudanese woman, age twenty-two, Boston, March 2011.
16. The “lost boys” label was introduced in Kakuma refugee camp, and has been used to describe the Sudanese refugee youth who resettled to the United States. Humanitarian workers made connections between the Sudanese young men’s experiences of flight and of those in the novel *Peter Pan*, in which the young boys became separated from their caretakers and ended up travelling together as a group, in an effort to protect themselves from the hostilities of adult life. Grabska describes that in the 1980s, prior to becoming refugees in Kenya, the lost boys had been forcibly recruited by the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army and were

- mobilized in military training camps in Ethiopia; Grabska, "Lost Boys," 481.
17. Tara McKelvey, "Where Are the 'Lost Girls'?"
  18. Interview with a southern Sudanese woman, age twenty-five, Boston, March 2011.
  19. Jeff Crisp, *Protracted Refugee Situations: Some Frequently Asked Questions* (Geneva: UNCHR, Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, 2003), 6.
  20. Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 190.
  21. Crisp, *Protracted Refugee Situations*, 6.
  22. Wenona Giles, "Class, Livelihood and Refugee Workers in Iran," in *Mobility, Mobilization, Migration: Class and Contention in a World in Motion*, ed. P. Barber and W. Lem (Oxford: Berghahn Press, 2010).
  23. UNHCR, *2005 Global Refugee Trends* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2006), 3.
  24. Anne Harris, "I Ain't No Girl: Representation and Reconstruction of the 'Found Girls' of Sudan," *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, 4, no. 1 (Autumn 2010): 41–63; Tara McKelvey, "Where Are the 'Lost Girls'?", Laura DeLuca, "Lost Girls of Sudan," *Women Media Center*, 15 February 2008, accessed August 10, 2011, <http://womensmediacenter.com/blog/2008/02/wmc-exclusive-lost-girls-of-sudan-by-laura-deluca/>; Matheson, "The 'Lost Girls' of Sudan."
  25. Interview with southern Sudanese woman, age twenty-eight, Boston, March, 2011.
  26. Amina Mama, *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
  27. Government of South Sudan (GoSS), *2010 Annual Education Census Manual* (Juba: GoSS, forthcoming); GoSS, *Education Statistics for Southern Sudan 2009, National Statistical Booklets, 2010* (Juba: GoSS, 2009, 2010).
  28. Girls' education was initiated in Sudan in 1907 by Babikr Badri, a Sudanese national who established the first informal school for his daughters and nieces in his house. Then, in 1921, the British administration opened five schools for girls in the north followed by the Girls' Training College for Teachers in Omdurman. In the south, missionaries established the first girls' school in 1930. In 1974, the first secondary school was established for southern girls. The first university in the south, Juba University, was also opened in 1974.
  29. Haja Kashif Badri, *Women's Movement in the Sudan* (New Delhi: Asia News Agency Publications, 1986).
  30. *Ibid.*, 21.
  31. Daniel Chanoff, "Education Is My Mother and My Father," 35–46.
  32. Badri, *Women's Movement*, 21.
  33. Stephanie Beswick, "History of Dinka," *Northeast African Studies* 8, no. 2 (2001): 35–62.
  34. Interview with a southern Sudanese man, age twenty-five, Boston, March 2011.
  35. Jeff Crisp and Christopher Talbot, *Learning for a Future: Refugee Education in Developing Countries* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2001), 2.
  36. Wright, "The Case of Refugee Education," 44–47.
  37. Interview with a southern Sudanese woman, age twenty-eight, Boston, March 2011.
  38. Interview with a southern Sudanese woman, age twenty-two, Boston, March 2011.
  39. By tertiary education, this paper focuses on higher education, particularly post-secondary education, and skills training programs.
  40. Wenona Giles, "Higher Education and Its Relationship to Precarious Lives and Rights in Refugee Camps: The Borderless Higher Education in Refugee Camps (BHER) Initiative" (presentation, IASFM Conference, Kampala, Uganda, July 4, 2011).
  41. Anikó Hatoss and Henk Huijser, "Gendered Barriers to Educational Opportunities: Resettlement of Sudanese Refugees in Australia," *Forced Migration Special Issue, Gender and Education* 22, no. 2 (2010).
  42. Andy Reyes, "The Learning Experiences of Southern Sudanese Refugees in Community College in the United States" (Qualifying Paper, University of Massachusetts Boston, February 18, 2011).
  43. The interviewees whose statements are incorporated in this paper are currently enrolled (both at the undergraduate and graduate levels) at universities such as the University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston University, and Brandeis; in community colleges such as Bunker Hill and Roxbury; and in other institutions of higher learning such as the Massachusetts College of Art.
  44. Interview with southern Sudanese man, age thirty-eight, Boston, March 2011.
  45. The Sudanese Education Fund is a non-profit organization whose mission is to advance the Massachusetts Southern Sudanese community in education, employment, and financial stability. It provides selected members of the community with grants for tuition and books, as well as computers.
  46. Interview with southern Sudanese woman, age twenty-six, Boston, March 2011.
  47. Andy Reyes, "The Learning Experiences of Southern Sudanese Refugees in Community College in the United States," 8.
  48. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed on January 9, 2005, established guidelines for a popular referendum that was held in January 2011 to determine the future of southern Sudan. As a result of the referendum vote, southern Sudan declared its independence in July 2011.
  49. Andy Reyes, "The Learning Experiences of Southern Sudanese Refugees in Community College in the United States," 8.
  50. Hatoss and Huijser, "Gendered Barriers to Educational Opportunities."

51. Interview with a southern Sudanese woman, age twenty-four, Boston, March 2011.
52. Interview with a southern Sudanese woman, age twenty-six, Boston, March 2011.
53. Interview with a southern Sudanese woman, age twenty-four, Boston, March 2011.
54. Interview with a southern Sudanese woman, age twenty-six, Boston, March 2011.

---

*Amani El Jack, PhD, is a tenure-track assistant professor in the Department of Women’s Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston.*