

**As the world marks international days to end conflict-related sexual violence and hate speech, let's not forget the important role South Sudanese women peacebuilders play in preventing and responding to these issues**



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South Sudan holds a special place in both of our hearts. We have had the great privilege of working with and learning from South Sudanese women for many years – from under the shade of trees along the banks of the White Nile, to meeting halls in Juba, Nairobi, Ottawa, New York, and beyond. Time and again, South Sudanese women demonstrate their remarkable leadership as peacebuilders, seeking a more safe, equitable, and democratic future for their country.

As the world prepares to mark two important days next week, South Sudan is on our minds. The International Day for Countering Hate Speech is on Sunday, June 18, and the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict is Monday, June 19.

When any country lays the groundwork for elections – as South Sudan is doing for next year – hate speech, incitement to violence, and sexual violence are crucial issues to consider. Often, they are interlinked. Always, they require women's leadership to prevent and address them.

Under the UN Secretary-General's Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, launched in 2019, hate speech is defined as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are – in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factor."

Conflict-related sexual violence is often brutal, deliberate, and intended to punish or humiliate individuals and their communities. It can include rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, and any other form of sexual violence that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict. Conflict-related sexual violence is a risk factor for atrocity crimes.

Elections planned for next year will be a historic opportunity for the people of South Sudan to help forge a democratic future for their country. In the tasks that lie ahead, there will be an opportunity to take a human rights-based approach.

Voters, especially women in rural and remote areas, need to be informed about the elections, including how to run as a candidate, how and where to cast their ballot, and more. Communities

may be confronted with examples of hate speech, both online and offline, regarding members of their own community or other communities, and will need to choose how they will respond. Sexual and gender-based violence may also be used in attempts to prevent women's full and meaningful participation, whether as voters, candidates, media workers, civil society members, etc.

South Sudanese women can play crucial roles leading the whole country to both prevent and address these challenges.

Too often, women are viewed only as victims of violence in conflict. Yet, we also play critical roles as community leaders, the bedrocks of their families, breadwinners, and through serving in key roles such as midwives, teachers, and entrepreneurs.

Women often have extensive networks through which to share information and lead early warning efforts when the signs of hate speech start brewing in a community. Young women, in particular, can play a role in stopping the cycle of hate. And survivors, who have lived experience, also know best where the greatest needs are – which protective factors could have prevented the violence, which resources they now need to heal and move forward.

These are just some of the reasons why a new initiative launched at the United Nations this week is so important. The Plan of Action for Women in Communities to Counter Hate Speech and Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes (also called The Napoli Women in Communities Plan of Action), can serve as a blueprint for enhancing the roles of women on these issues every part of the world.

Thanks to South Sudan's quota, 35 percent of positions in key decision-making bodies are to be allocated to women. Outside of these institutions, women peacebuilders, journalists, and other civil society leaders also make their voices heard. We saw a great example of this leadership with the recent campaign led by young South Sudanese feminist group, Ma'Mara Sakit Village, #WhereIsTheAntiGBVbill, which raised awareness about this important piece of legislation for supporting justice for survivors of gender-based violence.

Another area where women could play a central role is accountability. Accelerating the establishment of the transitional justice mechanisms under chapter five of the Revitalized Peace Agreement – the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing, the Compensation and Reparation Authority and the Hybrid Court for South Sudan – must be a priority. There must be space for women in such crucial processes.

South Sudanese women are tremendously capable, but they cannot address these challenges alone. Support from South Sudanese men, especially male politicians, faith leaders, and community leaders, will expand the impacts of women's efforts and benefit everyone.

As we mark these two important international days, let us acknowledge – and support – the outstanding women of South Sudan working to build enduring peace for all.

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