# NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH

# Frozen words:
## memory and sexual violence
## amongst Sudanese refugee women in Cairo

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**UNHCR**
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**Introduction**

The presumptive end to violence in South Sudan began in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the North and South. The peace process culminated in a referendum in January 2011, when the people of South Sudan voted overwhelmingly to secede from the North. Despite the CPA, South Sudanese refugees continued to apply for asylum in Egypt between 2006 and 2010 in more or less the same numbers as were recorded in earlier years (UNHCR 2003; 2006; 2010).

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Egypt with South Sudanese female refugees seeking educational, legal and psychosocial services at St. Andrew's Refugee Services in downtown Cairo. The information presented in the paper derives from participant observation, interviews with single South Sudanese women and NGO service providers between August 2011 and February 2012.

The author assisted in preparing refugee resettlement referrals to UNHCR throughout the research period and also undertook an analysis of relevant media articles, policy documents, internet blogs and literature produced by UNHCR and the Egyptian government between January 2004 and February 2012. Pseudonyms are provided for all women discussed in this work. Institutional Review Board approval from the University of South Florida was obtained prior to beginning fieldwork.

Unsurprisingly, women primarily discussed the destruction of their communities and loss of husbands as the deciding factor for fleeing South Sudan. Sexual violence against them played a significant role in both occurrences and was often the basis for questions asked during refugee status determination with UNHCR. Due to the taboo of discussing rape and the extreme power differentials between the survivors of rape and their interviewers we can extrapolate that incidences of sexual violence against Southern Sudanese women (in both their country of origin and asylum) we know about pale in comparison to those actually committed.

Yet, because sexual violence against marginalized women is a widely understood practice internationally, there is an unfortunate tendency to forget its local implications among displaced populations. Not only is this problematic in terms of addressing the ongoing psychological trauma women face as a result of their past experiences, but also in their difficulties communicating (convincing) to aid agencies the physical threats they face in revolutionary Egypt, particularly if what they are experiencing is understood as happening to everyone. When something becomes a common experience for refugees in Cairo then the collectivity of this experience places them all in a 'less vulnerable' position with the UNHCR as it is no longer considered a unique experience.

Ironically, it is the very commonness of violent sexual harassment of refugee African women in Egypt – so widely known among NGO workers that it often remains unspoken in an environment of mutual understanding – that prevents a complete picture of contemporary violence against Southern Sudanese women from forming. African refugee women are often subjected to unwanted and aggressive solicitations for sex on the streets of Cairo.

One study participant succinctly described her perceived motivations of sexual harassment from Egyptian men in racial, gender and migration terms: "them who call us prostitute, they think because we are black female refugees we are prostitutes…they do not believe us when

we tell them no." With the extreme dearth of street police after the January 2011 revolution, sexual attacks (as recounted by refugee women) by Egyptian men have significantly increased. Uncooperative government, ongoing civil violence, dearth of reporting by local press on refugee issues and an often brutal police force in an urban asylum location such as Cairo paired with entrenched discrimination against refugees merge to form an environment where women must combat violence on a near daily basis.

For many of the women who fled Southern Sudan due to the aftermath of sexual violence, daily forms of sexual harassment on the streets of Cairo paired with frequently told stories of rape in revolutionary Egypt circling through refugee communities, can be devastating to women's sense of peace and security. Additionally, if such experiences are a common (taboo to discuss) occurrence rather than an interruption of normal life, women's ability to remember details of these events may be significantly impaired.

Despite the fact that music, dance and storytelling, particularly through songs, as an oral method of communication is a centuries old Sudanese practice for discussing war, violence and societal suffering, there are very few stories of the courage of Sudanese women during conflict found in either the repertoire of traditional singers (*hakamah*) or contemporary media. Dinka songs from the south focus overwhelmingly on the bravery of Dinka men.

Hakamah singers in the west (overwhelmingly women), sing to militiamen of remaining strong and courageous for the benefit of their tribe. In essence, there is no inspiring collective identity, or group identity that transcends the individual, of Sudanese women with a history of violence refugees can look to as a method of identification and communication. Many Southern Sudanese women living outside the borders of their country will need the strength of a group identification that recognizes their suffering and strength in surviving difficult circumstances before they can envision undertaking the daunting task of rebuilding their lives in a new location yet again.

The CPA and its effect upon perception of asylum-seekers by local populations, the attitudes of those citizens currently living in South Sudan towards migrants, and UNHCR policies has placed pressure on refugees to repatriate. This is particularly important when discussing single Southern Sudanese women compelled to sever ties with their surrogate state (UNHCR) to return to a country where they relied on the – now absent – support of family and community to survive.

To illustrate the multiple forms of pressure women involved in this study felt to return to South Sudan, I am reminded of the stories of several study participants who have been told multiple times by Egyptian citizens over the last few years some version of the sentiment 'go home, you have a country now so leave ours.'

Insistent urging to leave Egypt comes not only from Egyptians however; but from Southern Sudanese citizens currently living in the south. For example, during the study period a group of three well-known and successful Southern Sudanese businessmen came to Cairo in November 2011 to host a church meeting with refugees living in the capital. The men implored the Southern Sudanese women in the audience (of which three research participants from this study were a part of) to return to South Sudan and help rebuild their country. It was their duty and obligation as the mothers and daughters of the south, they said, to stop wasting their time in Egypt and return home.

And while the UNHCR only facilitates voluntary repatriation, the fact that resettlement out of Egypt to a third country is 'essentially non-existent' for Southern Sudanese refugees is arguably a form of pressure women feel if they have no hope of leaving the difficult surroundings of Egypt for an opportunity to live in a more developed country (personal communication with refugee lawyer in Cairo, 2/12/2012).

The frequency with which refugee women experience and must speak of violence against them during their stay in Cairo almost guarantees that bodily traumas are not transcended but instead folded into their everyday experiences (Das 2007). That is, their experience as a refugee seeking UNHCR protection – indeed the very method by which they are able to claim 'refugee' status – in a politically unstable country of asylum such as Egypt is dependent upon continued communication of past and present violent experiences in order to secure future assistance.

Recent political events such as the separation of South Sudan from the Khartoum government and the Egyptian revolution reveal the rapidly changing reality of Southern Sudanese refugee women today, yet there are no corresponding stories of women's experiences of escaping sexual violence in South Sudan (or enduring violence in Egypt) for refugee women to claim as their own. Women may speak of violence against them frequently, but only during specific communications with UNHCR or NGO's providing assistance to refugees, not with their families and communities.

These stories spoken in isolation prevent a collective identity of women from emerging. Now, more than ever, women feel the pressure to repatriate to Southern Sudan; however, weak connections to their birth state due to their reasons for fleeing, reliance upon UNHCR as a surrogate state, and lack of a collective identity to unite women and provide them with a sense of agency may mean that single female refugees will not choose repatriation.


**Methods**

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Egypt with Southern Sudanese female refugees seeking educational, legal and psychosocial services at St. Andrew's Refugee Services in downtown Cairo. Data reported here from the ongoing project came from participant observation, interviews with single[1] Southern Sudanese women and NGO services providers, and daily systematic observation from August 2011 – February 2012. Observational data was collected at, and immediately surrounding St. Andrew's Refugee Services located in downtown Cairo.

Direct systematic observation builds upon information I gained during participant observation and interviews by constructing a systematic account of daily activity patterns not dependent upon memory or cultural expectation biases unconsciously introduced by participant observation (Szalai 1972). Attention was paid to who interacts with whom on a daily basis, how long and how often activities are performed and patterns in activity performance.

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[1] Widowed and divorced women were included as well; however, 'single' is the term used throughout this paper for convenience.

I also assisted in preparing refugee resettlement referrals to UNHCR throughout the above study period. Content analysis of relevant media reports, policy documents, Internet blogs, human rights reports and UNHCR and Egyptian government literature from January 1, 2004 to February 1st, 2012 informs preliminary research conclusions.

Working with women in an educational, legal and psychosocial context on a daily basis in downtown Cairo afforded the opportunity to explore details of the gendered violence refugee women experienced in Southern Sudan, during their migration north, and contemporarily in revolutionary Egypt. As the violence women of Southern Sudan experience (past and present) does not discriminate by age, the term 'women' in this article is not used to reference only those 18 or older.

Observational data was obtained from Southern Sudanese females of all ages. Southern Sudanese women who participated in this study ranged from 12-years-old to seventy four, with the average age between thirty-five and forty. Collectively these women's lives span several generations and, correspondingly, their histories encompass several different periods of Sudanese war and Egyptian unrest.

My research bias was to discuss the collective experience of violence refugee women have encountered, past and present. As such, in describing the violence histories of women in this report, their words are that of composite characters (condensing several stories into one) to highlight my primary research focus – collectivity not individual – and to protect the identity of women whose personal stories I have been entrusted with (Narayan 2012; Angrosino 2002).

Head of households in most circumstances, these single women had moved themselves and often their children to another country in search of a life free from violence and hunger and access to education; therefore, I saw the women I worked with first and foremost as survivors. Despite knowledge of their violent histories and present circumstances, conceptualization of women as survivor plays a large role in my research design, descriptions, interview protocol and conclusions made regarding preliminary data analysis.


**Frozen words**

Two fingers, thumb and index, pinching the bridge of the nose (an almost internationally recognized gesture for headache) signal the end of the interview. Telatha, a 29-year-old woman from Juba, had been speaking about the impetuous for her journey to Cairo for approximately an hour and a half at this point, with the last thirty minutes of the interview spent fighting tears and refusing to meet my gaze. Her headache is almost certainly the result of fighting the stress hormones that trigger tears.

From a medical standpoint, it would be easier on the body to let tears flow to release tension and prevent a stress related migraine; however, this was not always (or even often) the witnessed response of women during interviews. White-knuckled hands in the lap, silent and isolated drops quickly wiped from the eyes, preoccupation with staring at walls and floors rather than the interviewer, and periodic rubbing of the temples and nose were frequently observed signs of agitation. A careful observer of the interview seated across the room with no insight into the words Telatha was speaking may not even recognize her distress in communicating the violent experiences of her life.

Other women interviewed answered personal questions related to their sexual history of violence similar to Ashra, a 45-year-old woman from Unity State. The story Ashra told could have been of another woman's life entirely for the lack of visible emotion displayed during the retelling. A monotone voice, an expressionless face, and a steady (if unfocused) stare were the method by which she was able to communicate her history of sexual violence.

Commonly witnessed interview behavior such as Ashra's are perhaps why I have been surprised to hear, on more than one occasion, legal interns remarking on the ease with which women can recount their histories of sexual violence. My thoughts on this point, as have been stated previously by Rabelais and Das, are that these women had speech but not voice (Rabelais 1653; Das 2007). Voice referring to the preferred method of communication with its implication of the active role of women (agency) in the narration process.

The phrase 'frozen words' is derived from the work of Francois Rabelais, a 16th century monk, who describes the sounds of battle as words frozen into discernible shapes that are released after melting for listeners to hear a year later. In Rabelais's story, the meaning behind these units of sound had become frozen in time. His narrative reminds us that words, when given to someone else, can be carried through time to an unknown audience (Rabelais 1991).

Anthropologist Veena Das also uses this term in her research on how violence against women in post-Partition India affects the everyday lives of women and their families (Das 2007). In Das's usage of the term, it takes life to give voice to frozen words. That is, refugee's words are frozen by being given to an audience not present during their creation and unknowledgeable about the difficulties in speaking the words aloud. Women's speech (frozen words) are therefore provided to UNHCR for credibility determination without human voice (i.e. Telatha, Ashra, etc.) to infuse them with meaning.

For a South Sudanese woman to speak of rape during testimony proceedings for the UNHCR, she must first break through an indescribably dense yet invisible wall; the taboo for voicing violent sexual actions committed against her. Regardless of whether or not her interviewer is knowledgeable of the consequence of her words, she is intimately aware that in breaking this taboo she is revealing not just her own (perceived) shameful history, but also that of her family and her community.

To speak of rape is not an individual experience; it is a collective memory that implicates the failure of family and community in preventing its disgraceful occurrence (Akpinar 2003). This is the reason why rape is so effective in destabilizing community solidarity; this is where the strength of the taboo in speaking of sexual violence originates.

The powerful pull for women to remain silent is true regardless of whether she is living in a small village in South Sudan or as a refugee in Cairo's metropolis. In the words of Veena Das, "even in the face of horrific death, men know how to behave according to norms of masculinity – women know what it takes to preserve the honor of their men" (Das 2007:87). In 1994, UN Special Rapporteur Radhika Coomaraswamy noted in her statement on violence against women during war "such rape is the symbolic rape of the community, the destruction of the fundamental elements of a society and culture – the ultimate humiliation of the male enemy" (Mishra 2000).

Overcoming the pull of silence in communications with the UNHCR is a testament to several dimensions of women's political engagement as refugees: (1) increased separation from community values through breaking the taboo of discussing sexual violence, (2) reinforcing women's experiences as victims as this is the privileged testimony in gaining access to urban resources, and (3) the strength of purpose women demonstrate in discussing their personal sexual histories to strangers in order to secure present and future life-saving aid for themselves and their children. It is upon the last point that I perceive women displaying extreme courage in communicating the intimate details of their lives to UNHCR gatekeepers charged with evaluating the credibility of a refugee claim on the basis of spoken words.

Women may repeat their histories of sexual violence with seeming ease (as noted by legal interns), but this should not hide the invisible difficulties they had to overcome in the telling nor the knowledge that their words have been frozen in time in order to be provided to a future UNHCR audience for dissection. As stated by Das, it takes voice to give life to frozen words.


## Violence and the everyday

Whahete, a 39-year-old woman from Malakal, begins to collect all of the medical reports, UNHCR communications and referral letters she has spread over the scarred wooden table. As she prepares herself to leave, rearranging her black scarf more tightly around her head and tucking the tails under her chin, I ask the question I always end with during interviews, "Is there anything we haven't discussed here today that you would like to talk about?" She hesitated, looked across the room at an infant bundled in pink and shook her head. I wanted her to stay and continue talking.

I always want women to stay and continue talking after the interviews are complete, perhaps because I have spent the last hour asking questions like "Were you the victim of violence or torture?" and I would like for them to be able to return home without the mental images of violence my questions may have aroused. But on this occasion I wanted Whahete to continue speaking because there were gaps in her story that needed to be filled.

Several years of Whahete's life, between the destruction of her home, the disappearance of her brother and father in South Sudan and her arrival in Cairo, could not be recovered from her memory. Yet, from other details of her story we know she spent many of these years in a displaced persons camp and managed to make a difficult trek to Egypt alone. We *know* from countless other refugee stories, personal experiences, media reports, and refugee literature that none of these events in Whahete's life were free of violence.

Life in an IDP camp as a single female without male relatives present, travel through Northern Sudan and Southern Egypt as a single Southern Sudanese female – these dangerous events seem like those which would push themselves to the forefront of her memory engaging her ability to recall detail, yet they were only mentioned by Whahete in passing and only when pressed.

The violent events of Whahete's life unable to be voiced reveal the limits of language in communicating suffering (Scarry 1985) and the recession of memories that interviewers may wish to discuss in detail as examples of 'traumatic' experiences. Observation of women's lack of details in communicating an event of importance to establishing their refugee

credibility was not an isolated experience of Whahete. I have spoken to women who are able to recall with great detail fifteen years later who they were with, on what side of the village, and next to what tree they were hiding when their homes were burned; yet, were unable to recall details of their rape in Cairo less than two years ago.

Any experienced interviewer working with clients coming from a history of violence knows that distress asserts itself in different ways on the human psyche. Memories do not always or often reveal themselves when called upon, in an ordered and linear method and with sufficient detail to convince listeners of their truth.

Legal assistance is provided to refugees to help explain these gaps or try to fill them in with repeated questioning, but I believe it is the inconsistent pattern of life history detail that tells the most important story of all. That is, what information is considered culturally permissible to discuss (forming a socially sanctioned collective memory of an event able to be repeated through language) and the means by which collective violence for Southern Sudanese refugees has not become *an* event which interrupts their daily life but one that is 'folded' into their everyday experiences (Das 2007).

Upon the former topic I will return in the next section; however, the latter hypothesis of women's observed difficulty describing seeming memorable violent events in their life speaks to the new forms of women's political life that emerge from a lifetime spent enduring violence.

At the intersections between human life, politics, and violence Giorgio Agamben has elaborated on a powerful political theory popular in international relations literature examining 'states of exception' (Agamben 2005). These are occurrences in history where those with political power (sovereigns) may suspend the normal rule of law for the public good (Agamben 2005). Within the system of exception, an absolute power over life is controlled by those who make the law, are above the law and can 'temporarily' suspend the law. When this temporary political arrangement stabilizes into permanency as has been demonstrated time and again in contemporary conflict, sovereigns have power over human life (Agamben 2005).

In keeping with Agamben's explanation of the power sovereign states hold over its population, I would argue that the Southern Sudanese female experience with violence has settled into such an extended 'permanency' that it no longer lays claim to exceptional periods of their lives but instead constitutes an everyday reality. The sovereign states of both Sudan and Southern Sudan were not only unable to protect them, its soldiers and police forces were often responsible for the sexual humiliation they, their families and their communities were forced to bear.

As a refugee living outside the borders of their country (and theoretically no longer inside its sovereignty), women in Cairo look to the UNHCR as their 'surrogate state' (Slaughter and Crisp 2009). In order to be folded into the protection of their new state, refugees are required to relate their history of violence in sufficient detail to convince listeners of the credibility of their experiences.

For a refugee appealing to the UNHCR for asylum – preventing the possibility of deportation back to a dangerous location – establishing credibility during their interviews can quite literally mean the difference between life and death. A 2002 study of refugee status

determination decisions from the UNHCR office in Cairo found that seventy-seven percent of rejections were ascribed to "lack of credibility" (Kagan 2003:369).

Undoubtedly, international agencies such as the UNHCR that must rely heavily on testimony to determine refugee status (after all, persons rarely flee a war zone with birth certificates and passports) are not getting the full story they wish to hear. Not, in my opinion, because the majority of women seek to gain services through an imagined history, but because of a failure to understand how violence in their lives has descended into the ordinary, unchained to a collective identity and therefore incomplete in memory.

The everyday reality of female refugees is responsible for a collective identity "closely tied with the task of recovery of memory" (Das 2007:214). When violent events take on the level of certainty that they will occur, and occur frequently, in a woman's life we can say that they are a part of her everyday landscape rather than its distortion. Since it is the distortion of life, the eventfulness of violence, that the UNHCR seeks to understand (and bases its extension of services upon), I believe there is a considerable amount of disconnect between the information revealed during communications with the UNHCR and the daily, lived realities of women with a history of gender-based violence.

Let me provide an example of a typical event, a daily ritual in Tisene's life, as an example of the potential disconnect between experience and telling. Coming back from a kiosk one morning situated directly across from the refugee school she attends daily, I heard a young Egyptian man yell out a commonly voiced sexual taunt to Tisene while making an aggressive movement of his hands toward her. She ignored the man but began to walk faster, quickly slipping into the iron gates of the school and surrounding herself with a circle of friends already inside.

There was no chance that she did not hear the man or understand his words. She has been living in Egypt for several years and speaks fluent Egyptian Arabic. When I had the opportunity to speak with Tisene in the courtyard of the school a week later I asked if she had any trouble walking to school that morning – similar to what had happened last week. She responded, "What happened last week?" A potentially violent encounter that I had witnessed, committed to memory and to paper, was just one event in a series of violent taunts she had experienced that week necessitating my clarification of "last Tuesday morning before school started." This is but one example of similar experiences female refugees in Cairo are made to feel where violence does not become an interruption of the ordinary so much as a descent into it (Das 2007:218).

## Collective *imaginaire*[2]

"It was 2 am in the morning. I woke up when they broke into our apartment through the front door. I was so scared. I ran to grab my children to get them out of the house. My daughters were sleeping in the other room with my sister. We ran out into the street through another apartment. We had no shoes on. I remember Zaynab cut her foot on a piece of glass." This

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[2] This term is derived from French philosophy and historiography, and used in the work of Mbembe, to refer to a collection of ideas from a defined group (Mbembe 2002). The term *imaginaire* is intended to go beyond that of mythology (as comprised solely of narratives) to encompass narratives, motifs, songs, etc. (Patlagean 1988; Durand 1960).

description of a home invasion in Cairo came from Ithna, a 31-year-old women from Wau. The incidence she described occurred approximately five years prior.

Ithna knew the specific day and time at which the attack occurred. She could describe her children's bedroom, the clothes they were wearing, the name of the street they ran to for safety, and the exact spot on the heel of her daughter's foot cut by glass on the day their apartment was broken into and robbed. They were forced to flee their home in Southern Sudan for the same reason.

Throughout the retelling of this event, Ithna repeated over and over again how scared she was for her children. She desperately wanted to move to a new apartment in a better neighborhood so that they would be safe. When asked to describe any other incidences of violence in Cairo, she mentioned that two men had raped her in 2007 while walking home from work. She did not know what street this occurred on, she could not remember the precise date it happened and did not remember if the men had spoken to her or not before the attack.

She did not report the event to the police because she did not believe they would do anything for her. [When her apartment was broken into she had gone to the local police station to file a report and was told that unless she knew the names of the men who had broken into her home, nothing could be done]. Ithna never discussed the rape with her sister or any other family or community members. I was, as far as I knew, the third person she had ever told – the first two being interviewers at the UNHCR. Her story embodies what Taussig would refer to as a "public secret" – something "generally known but cannot be articulated" (Taussig 1999:5).

When probed during interviews, the pieces of their lives women most often revealed in great detail occurred when violence not only interrupted their daily routine, but threatened the health and safety of others as well, frequently children. These memorable events included such actions as….my daughter harassed and beaten after leaving market…my friend and I attacked by knife by two men at night on our way to the UNHCR offices…my son was beaten four times this month at school, he is the only foreigner in Grade 1…arm fractured and purse snatched by thieves on a motorcycle, my daughter hit her forehead on the street when we were pushed down….landlord threw my family onto the street last night.

The detail in which each of these events was discussed by women is striking when compared the dearth of information they could remember or retell of their individual experiences of sexual violence. If events such as these are the only ones able to be communicated in detail how much of the unobserved, individual lives of refugee women are unknowable in spite of the intense and probing questions repeatedly asked by assistance agencies?

Women spoken to for this research had little or no frame of reference for discussing their individual violations unchained to the history of other women; these experiences, spoken only when pressed and only in isolation, could never be knit together for a collective history of sexual violence against Southern Sudanese women. Stated differently, these women have yet to experience a collective identity surrounding sexual violence during war or to encompass the dangers of being a single female refugee in a highly discriminatory and volatile location such as Cairo.

Female Southern Sudanese refugees have few, if any, culturally accepted methods for communicating sexual violence done to them. Taboo often forces silence among families and communities. This leads to the false impression that sexual violence can be marked off as an inevitable by-product of war and historically violent communities. Random acts considered in isolation, prevent a pattern from emerging – and a collective story from being told of an event.

Let me provide an example of a widely known, collective masculine refugee experience to demonstrate the communicative power of a culturally accepted group identity. The Lost Boys of Sudan conjure images of thousands of young Sudanese men, orphaned by war, walking thousands of miles across Southern Sudan over a period of several years to reach refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. The power of the collective story told of these courageous children focused a sustained and well-funded effort on the part of the international community to resettle a large percentage of these boys to countries in the Global North and to ensure the long-term educational and health needs of those who remained in East Africa (Deng et al. 2005; Geltman et al. 2005; Gabriel's Dream 2012).

What the collective identity of these boys does not reveal, indeed obscures, are the thousands of 'lost girls' who made this trek as well. Girls who were forced to abandon their birth communities and make equally difficult journeys to refugee encampments. These girls were 'fostered' upon arrival in camp, married at a young age often against their will and effectively disappeared into the history books (Nyabera 2002).[3]

The collective experiences of the Lost Boys, "even in the face of horrific death", conforms to cultural notions of male courage, strength and survival. Such is the picture of masculinity represented by the collective identity of Lost Boys that it is the moniker of a violent Sudanese gang in Cairo contemporarily responsible for theft, beatings and murder of urban African refugees in the midst of Egypt's racist surroundings.

Stories told by NGOs, journalists, and donors of the extraordinary effort women made to reach East African refugee camps and metropolis locations such as Cairo are at best folded into the narratives of men such as the Lost Boys, and at worst silenced for fear of bringing shame to male family and community members unable to prevent violence against women forcing them to flee. Collective identities formed around a common narrative – such as the Lost Boys – reflect societal norms in presenting an easy to recognize picture of male masculinity.

What is lost in this oversight is women's ability to overcome the shame of individual accountings of sexual violence through recognition that not only is their experience a collective one, but also their very lives are testament to the strength required of them to leave their devastated communities in search of peace.

Lack of a collective female identity during and after war ensures that many words describing their experience remain unspoken on the lips of those unable to communicate through the thick wall of silence they are responsible for maintaining. As Caruth reminds us, history like trauma is "never simply one's own…history is precisely the way we are implicated in each

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[3] An estimated 3,000 girls arrived in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya in 1992, yet "most have simply vanished from official records" (Matheson 2002).

other's traumas" (1991:192). The Southern Sudanese women spoken to for this project have yet to experience a collective accounting of the violence they have endured.

Preliminary research results indicate that lack of a collective identity for these women, formed around the specific violence they face as women (and are often shamed into suppressing), may create holes in the memory the 'ordinariness' of violence is unable to penetrate. A collective *imaginaire* – an ensemble of conceptions surrounding the political uses of women's bodies during and after war – would provide women with a history of sexual violence a collective language with which to express their individual experiences.

If stories of sexual violence emerge most easily as a collective identity, rather than as individual accountings we can better understand the pain and suffering of war and protracted post-conflict violence as a collective experience (Das and Kleinman 2001) without losing sight of the complexity of individual experiences such as those displayed by Telatha and Ashra.


**Stateless women**

I have argued that the complexity of women's experiences with violence and its lack of translation into a collective identity affect their memories and methods of communication, particularly with the UNHCR. Today, post-South Sudanese independence and during ongoing revolution struggles for power in Egypt when the potential is high for both voluntary repatriation and increased violence against refugees in Cairo, we need to take this concept a step further in order to understand single refugee women's connection to South Sudan. What image of South Sudan did the female participants in this research hold?

In early November 2011, I was approached by an International Office of Migration (IOM) representative in Egypt interested in my fieldwork with Southern Sudanese refugees. The IOM's presence in Egypt was originally established to assist third-country nationals displaced by the Gulf War. Today, one of their operational mandates is to provide transportation and logistical repatriation assistance to South Sudanese refugees who elect to return to their birth country. The IOM representative wanted to know what I thought it would take in order to get women to repatriate back to South Sudan. I did not have a good answer for her. It was not a popular topic of discussions among the single women I work with.

Southern Sudanese refugee repatriation facilitated by international organizations such as the UNHCR and IOM focus on safety concerns ('Are peace talks underway in the country of origin, or is there a likelihood they will be in the near future?') and reintegration of refugees in local society ('Are the rights of refugees and returnees respected and their reintegration needs being met?') (Resettlement Handbook 2004:30-32).

While safety is certainly a part of women's hesitancy in bowing to the pressure of post-CPA repatriation – a week after my conversation with the IOM representative, military aircraft from Sudan crossed the hazy border between North and South Sudan bombing Yida refugee camps killing at least twelve (Copnall 2011) – it is not the most pressing concern for the single/widowed women spoken with for this study. War and violence have been more of a constant in their lives than peace and safety, even in their country of asylum.

As I sit writing this paragraph today (November 23, 2011) violent protests in Tahrir Square over stagnant government reform post-revolution continue for the seventh day. Many of the study participants able to be reached by phone this week have been unable to return to work due to the violence, their children who attend refugee schools downtown have not been to school for several days, medical and legal aid appointments have been canceled, and three women said they have not ventured outside of their apartments since the violence began for fear of being attacked on the streets. While these reoccurring events in revolutionary Egypt certainly increase their desire to leave it does not mean they cast their gaze back upon Southern Sudan as a viable option for relocation.

To ask a single refugee woman acting as head of her household in Cairo why she does not want to return to South Sudan, the response would usually come in the form of a question, "What do I have to return to? My community is gone", "My home was destroyed. My husband is dead. Where would I go?" or "Why? I would be living on the streets. My mother and father were killed when my village burned." An important question to ask here, summarized from the work of Daniel on refugee suffering, is what happens "when the image of the nation is lost so that alienation from the political present is matched by alienation from the imagined past" (Kleinman et al:xxiii)?

In order to understand the complexities involved in repatriation decisions for single women displaced by war we must first understand that peace for many is much more than the absence of war. It is the reformation of familial and community ties war took from them through assaults against their communities and violence enacted against women in particular.

For a woman whose family was murdered and village burned by Southern Sudanese rebel forces, subjected to rape in a displaced persons camp by Southern Sudanese government soldiers, sexual violence in Khartoum by Northern police forces and again to Egyptian criminals as a refugee in Cairo, the notion of 'statelessness' not only takes on an entirely new concept, but also is closely tied to women's repatriation decisions.

Tamanine, a 33-year-old woman from Warrab State whose story I just described, has never known what it means to enjoy the right of state protection. The violation of her body has repeatedly been used as a weapon of war and as a means of opportunistic exploitation where law and order have broken down due to violence. She was born into a country at war where 'true' citizenship is a negotiated concept based on skin color, dialect/language, gender, age and tribal origin.

Suspiciously regarded by government soldiers in Southern Sudan for having the light-skinned features of an 'Arab'; derisively regarded in (Northern) Sudan for her Southern Arabic dialect and familial past; and contemptuously treated by citizens of her asylum country that will never recognize her as citizen, the only quasi state protection she has ever known is as a recognized refugee of UNHCR.

The UNHCR defines statelessness as persons without nationality or citizenship. Refugee women employ a more fluid concept of 'belonging' to describe their unsettling existence in Cairo. For many, they have been stateless since the first attack on their village, since their first family member was killed or captured by soldier/rebels, since their *first* rape and the collective shame they were made to feel for its occurrence. For many of these women, their belonging to community and state was severed long before a peace agreement muddied the waters of her official affiliation with Sudan and South Sudan.

The tethers of family and community are closely tied to women's sense of belonging to South Sudan in a manner more binding than the transitory citizenship laws and protection they have experienced throughout a lifetime living amidst conflict. "How can I belong to a nation when my community no longer exists?", "My family is dead or missing…I belong nowhere", "Do I want to return? I don't have words. I don't know where home is" were often voiced responses to questions of repatriation. A noticeable lack of women's discussion regarding return to South Sudan focused on the country itself.

The rhetoric employed by the South Sudanese businessmen mentioned at the beginning of this paper on women's 'duty' and 'obligation' to return in order to rebuild their country was completely absent from women's conceptions of repatriation. Their memories of families and communities destroyed, of husbands killed and honour held and lost prevented an image of South Sudan as a unified nation to emerge. Their sense of statelessness did not end with the separation of South and North.

For Southern Sudanese refugee women, statelessness is inscribed through the loss of familial and communal ties not the bonds of the nation; therefore rhetoric of repatriation directed at them 'for the betterment of South Sudan' has no resonance. Women must first feel a part of South Sudan the nation, a part of its collective memory recognizing women's strength in surviving and escaping violence (rather than their loss of honour) before they can begin to conceptualize their contribution to its political future. Atrocities committed against women in their country of origin effectively severed their psychological bonds to place and space while these exact same violent acts enfold them within the protection of a surrogate state outside the borders of their country.

In my opinion, it is women's psychological separation from their communities that enables them to engage in activities as a refugee – particularly speaking of tabooed acts committed against them to procure aid from organizations such as UNHCR – which increase their political participation in surrogate state affairs. As women move across political boundaries, survival has necessitated they shed many traditional alliances in order to form new ones.

The extreme difficulty women face breaking the silence taboo simultaneously places them farther from the communities that birthed them and closer to the surrogate state that uses past traumatic events as a method of acceptance. That is, of course, if women are able to communicate their history of violence convincingly and/or they are paired with a UNHCR interviewer able to conceptualize the reasons behind both Telatha and Ashra's different responses to retelling past events.

Asking women who are the survivors of sexual violence to repatriate back to Southern Sudan is a decision they make based on much more than personal safety, a distant commodity they have rarely experienced, particularly in Egypt. This is a decision, ultimately, about leaving the protection of a surrogate state they feel a part of, to return to one they do not.

The suffering and sexual violence South Sudanese women have experienced has not been addressed collectively by the nation of South Sudan. The secret of their history of sexual violence is one shared with their surrogate state, not their birth communities. I argue this adds to their alienation from South Sudan and increases their conception of themselves as stateless.

If I could go back to that November 2011 conversation with the IOM representative to provide her with an answer for what women want in order to repatriate back to Southern Sudan, I would pose a question – a question asked neither tongue-in-cheek nor rhetorically – "Can you give them their sense of community back?" This is the protection single women will need to survive. "Can you create a space for them to envision their history as that of survivor, rather than carrier of shame." Peace for these women means much more than the absence of war.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Refugee women, all too often, have become the objects of writings, not the subjects. There are hidden dimensions of single women's refugee experience through histories unable to be communicated due to difficulty speaking, failure to recover (specific) detailed memories of violence in a life of endured conflict, and the inability of individual language when spoken in isolation to form a collective history of an event.

By noting that women with a history of sexual violence breach the difficulties in speaking of their personal experiences only through communications to UNHCR to secure asylum and refugee status, we may begin to understand why women are so often portrayed as the objects of violence, not the subjects of ethnographies. Here we may also begin to understand why single women with a history of sexual violence do not choose repatriation despite post-CPA pressure and the increasingly violent, racist and economically challenging living conditions they face daily in Egypt.

Women are being asked to leave a surrogate state that does not discriminate based on taboos associated with past violence (indeed confers belonging based on the threat of its existence) to a nation where their male relatives were killed or disappeared and their communities destroyed. These women have yet to experience a collective acknowledgement of their blamelessness in breaking apart communities and their bravery making a treacherous journey to another country for safety. They continue to be spoken of as either the carriers of community shame or perpetual victims.

Repatriation decisions Southern Sudanese women, acting as heads of their households, face contemporarily post-CPA is one that requires agency, not victimhood. That women have no collective experiences of sexual violence during war to reference (as men are able to describe their courage during war through often repeated songs and stories such as the 'lost boys') serves to further embed the idea that women's experiences with war are shameful and taboo.

The force of the taboo resides in the collective shame women would be revealing if they are to speak of sexual violence, yet lack of a socially acceptable method of communicating rape means they must experience a collectively experienced violence, individually. This also serves to reinforce women's victim status, undermining future repatriation efforts requiring agency.

If the security of birth communities is lot to these women forever, they must be provided with the security of the state to protect their rights as women. This cannot be achieved by imploring women to return to help build a nation responsible for violent acts against them that remain unacknowledged politically. Ask any Southern Sudanese woman old enough to remember the first Sudanese civil war following independence from British and Egyptian

rule, or the second civil war picking up where the first left off and she will tell you that signatures by heads of state on international peace agreements do not stop violence.

Peace is built by actions – ordinary, mundane, daily activities – where the survivors of war most affected by violence attempt to recreate individual, familial, and communal ties. Recreation events involve the ritualized activities of daily life such as securing sustenance, hygiene, conversation, healthcare, domestic upkeep, money-earning practices, childrearing and the formation of social networks which comprise daily existence and re-forms community ties (Das 2008). These events, overwhelming the domain of women, first require the protection of women's rights before many will feel secure enough to return and carry them out.

While the CPA may have succeeded in temporarily relieving tensions between the North and South, it has not changed the situation of women. In fact, the role of customary law (protected by the CPA) continues to perpetuate unequal gender relations (Aldehaib 2010). Though this paper has focused on sexual violence against women during war (to understand their reasons for fleeing South Sudan) and during their protracted refugee situation in Egypt (to understand their reasons for staying despite continued violence), it is important to keep in mind that sexual violence against women during war is firmly connected to pre-war normalization of violence in domestic relationships.

Until the political leaders of South Sudan recognize that a comprehensive peace agreement must include the rights of women in order to sustain peace, single women with a history of sexual violence will remain skeptical of the state's willingness to protect them – and they will most likely remain refugees. Failure to understand the needs of women in the complex process of reintegration means there is likely to be a male majority, a youthful male majority, volunteering to repatriate. Women, and the stabilizing effect their rituals have on communities, will not be equally represented in the future of South Sudan. This may have significant implications in the future peace of the new nation.[4]

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