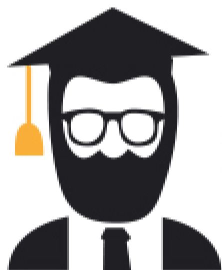

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"We want empowerment for our women": Transnational Feminism, Neoliberal Citizenship, and the Gendering of Women's Political Subjectivity in Postconflict South Sudan

In a small plane en route from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, thirteen delegates of the South Sudan Women's Empowerment Network (SSWEN) waited in anticipation to land on Sudanese soil. Following the signing of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), they had begun to organize a conference to promote women's participation in the period of tentative reconstruction. In August 2008, they traveled from across the United States—from Texas, Arizona, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Washington, DC—to host the event in Juba, the capital of the South. Filled with both trepidation and excitement, some of the women wept openly as they prepared to visit their birth country for the first time in twenty years. A documentary filmmaker disembarked ahead to capture the first welcoming moments as a delegation of government personnel and local SSWEN members greeted the women in the intense heat. A group of elder women sang and performed traditional Southern Sudanese dances while print, radio, and television journalists hovered with their cameras and microphones, awaiting the first official interview in the airport's VIP lounge. There a representative of the new arrivals announced, "We are here to meet with women at the grass roots. We want to share ideas, to enlighten them with workshops, trainings and discussion . . . and to learn

We would like to thank our colleagues and friends at the South Sudan Women's Empowerment Network for their support for our research and their comments on this article. We would also like to thank all the women we interviewed who participated in the conference and who permitted us to record their words and actions. Professors Lucy Jarosz and Dawn Couch provided valuable commentary on earlier drafts of this article. Finally, we would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers who provided thoughtful, critical, and valuable comments and reflections on our work.

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their side too. Then you empower them. We want empowerment for our women."[1]

This dramatic entrance into Southern Sudanese politics by women from the diaspora speaks to the growing importance of transnational connections in the contemporary post-CPA moment. Moreover, it demonstrates the ways in which this transnationalism is deeply gendered. The actions of SSWEN that day sent a powerful message to the public, international development organizations, and the new government that Southern women, including those in the diaspora, should be recognized as political subjects and included in the building of the new South Sudanese nation-state. In addition, SSWEN's work indicates a transnational shift in the South Sudanese women's movement and, by association, new strategies, tensions, and opportunities emerging through organizing efforts along diasporic and local lines. Positioning themselves as both privileged educators and students, and promoting a particular form of self-empowerment, diasporic Sudanese women emerge as new and increasingly important citizens and activists in the post-CPA era. In this article we explore this case of transnational feminist engagement, highlighting how female practices of citizenship and activism are articulated and enacted, both publicly and privately, through the scales of the body, family, community, and the (trans)national. Our work focuses on South Sudan, where a new and fragile peace is in place and where tentative nation-building efforts are in process. In this moment of social and political tumult, we suggest that new subjects and spaces for political activism and engagement are opening up for women in the diaspora and at home, revealing new opportunities but also tensions along lines of ethnic-regional–, faith-, and class-based difference.

We begin by historicizing SSWEN's entrance into a post-CPA South Sudan, providing a brief overview of the Sudanese civil conflict. Here we touch on the tensions within the Southern resistance movement, tensions that continue to frame contemporary politics, including women's movements. We contextualize the current rise of women's political activism by outlining the recent history of new gender-equity measures in the peace agreement and interim constitution, the flourishing of a civil society more

[1] Interviews and fieldwork observations used in this article were completed jointly by the authors between July and August 2008 in Juba, South Sudan. The authors transcribed all interviews and field notes personally, and these materials are on file with the authors. All quoted material in this article is taken from this research. A broader understanding of the organization and its work was obtained during a year of participant observation by each author prior to the conference meeting.

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open to the participation of women, and the promotion of women as ideal agents of development by international donor agencies. Moving to a focus on contemporary and emerging Sudanese transnational feminism, we ask: Who are the women of SSWEN, and what are their goals and strategies? In its efforts to build a unified movement, how has SSWEN negotiated historically entrenched tensions between women across differences of faith, ethnicity, class, and locality? Turning to a focus on the organizational mission of empowerment, we critically interrogate the form of empowerment promoted and ask, what kinds of gendered political subjects does such work produce, intentionally or otherwise? We suggest that, though contested, distinctly gendered forms of empowerment were privileged at the conference—those focusing on self-improvement as a pathway to citizenship and those privileging feminine forms of activism through the scales of the body and home. We argue that these approaches to empowerment are at once strategic and limiting. They offer women opportunities for political engagement within a tense and constrained political and sociocultural environment, and yet they work to elide demands for greater government responsibilities or structural changes. We close with a call for further research on African transnational feminisms in general and in the South Sudanese region in particular and for consideration of the ways in which African diasporic women are at once both marginalized and privileged in their efforts to engage with their counterparts at "home."

Ethnographies of the Sudanese diaspora: Transnational directions

Ethnographic research on the U.S.-based Sudanese diaspora has examined the challenges and opportunities of migration and resettlement, linking everyday experiences of employment, education, and welfare to broader social and economic formations of domestic refugee policy, neoliberal forms of government, and international humanitarianism.[2] Such work has integrated an analysis of gender in this process, exploring how new ideas about marriage and family—and new opportunities for education and employment—can disrupt norms around divorce, child custody, and bride wealth and can lead to gendered conflict. For example, Jon D. Holtzman (2000) has argued that the difficulties of transitioning from kinship-based networks in Sudan to more isolated social units in the United States in part underpin postmigration domestic violence and divorce within South-

[2] See Holtzman (2000), Abusharaf (2002), Shandy (2007), and DeLuca (2008).

ern Sudanese Nuer communities.[3] In connection, Dianna J. Shandy (2007) has noted the particular challenges Sudanese women in the United States face from Sudanese men who desire more traditional, subservient wives and, in connection, the tendency for these men to seek out arranged marriages to women living back in Sudan.

Keen to avoid representations of refugee women as passive victims, research on the U.S.-based Sudanese diaspora has also demonstrated how experiences of migration and resettlement can be both oppressive and libratory. For example, Laura DeLuca has critically explored both the opportunities and challenges presented by neoliberal refugee policies that promote self-sufficiency and push young Sudanese women into menial care and catering work (DeLuca and Eppich 2007; DeLuca 2008). Parallel work has similarly explored the effects of employment and education on political subjectivity following resettlement, with arguments that diasporic women are subverting traditional forms of gendered control, opening up new spaces for political engagement, and forging new connections with women in the diaspora and at home in Sudan. For example, Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf (2002) argues that these experiences and opportunities have resulted in women's greater participation in community activism and in some women's desire to raise awareness about Sudan in the wider U.S. public (see also DeLuca and Eppich 2007). In connection, Sondra Hale (1996, 2001) and Abusharaf (2002) have explored the role of diasporic Northern Sudanese women in promoting forms of women's activism. While focused on the lives of Sudanese in the United States, this body of work has documented the ways that enduring transnational connections to home shape the lives of those in the diaspora. We contribute to and extend such work by developing an emphasis on the links between Southern Sudanese women in the diaspora and in Sudan as the region shifts to reconstruction, development, and nation-building efforts.

This transnational emphasis on Sudan connects with feminist scholarship on women's political subjectivity during and following war, and it mirrors exciting work on transnational African women's organizing.[4] Such work has sought to examine the often unrecognized, marginalized, or privatized acts, spaces, and scales of women's resistance and struggle in

[3] The Nuer people are a particular ethnic group originally located within South Sudan and Western Ethiopia. Dianna J. Shandy (2007) focuses on this group in her study of South Sudanese communities in the United States.

[4] See Bernal (2001), Kuumba (2001), Nnaemeka (2003), and Tripp (2005).

this context.[5] However, in the broader scholarship on diasporic citizenship and activism, the role of women is often occluded or narrowly conceptualized (see Pessar and Mahler 2003). As scholars such as Pnina Werbner (2005) have argued, work on diasporas and diasporic politics tends to focus on men, male leadership, and patriarchal domination, with women positioned primarily as exploited or passive and with less attention paid to the ways that the local and gendered micropolitics of the diasporic public and private spheres come to be intertwined with forms of transnational political activism. Our work thus complements the body of feminist work on women and conflict while pushing scholarship on diasporic politics and transnationalism to more rigorously center both women and gendered analysis. Finally, we center the case study of South Sudan and the Southern Sudanese diaspora—a fascinating and complex case bringing together questions of nationalism, development, women's rights, and diasporic politics yet one that has been largely elided in transnational studies more generally and in work by feminist transnational scholars in particular.

Methodologically our study of SSWEN is driven by a strong feminist ethic of activist research.[6] Central to our research method was over a year of participant observation with SSWEN, including engagement in the group's 2007 U.S.-based leadership training process, a series of SSWEN events (including fund-raisers, South Sudanese cultural awareness days, and a strategic planning session), and preparation for and attendance at the 2008 conference. Our research with SSWEN was preceded by a history of work with refugee communities. Jennifer Lynn Erickson has been working with Southern Sudanese refugees in the United States since 2001, first as a caseworker for Lutheran Social Services in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and later as a researcher and volunteer. In 2005 she joined SSWEN, and from spring 2006 until fall 2007, while serving on the board of directors, she attended three SSWEN conferences in the United States, as well as the 2008 Sudan Conference. Caroline Faria volunteered with the Refugee Women's Association in Seattle, Washington, between 2005 and 2006 and first began interviewing SSWEN representatives across the United States in January 2007. This was the beginning of over a year of participant observation with the group, including attendance at a SSWEN conference in Washington, DC, in September 2007 and a year of volunteer work preparing for the 2008 conference. In this way, our intellectual

[5] See Enloe (1983), Cockburn (1998), Dowler (1998), Lilly and Irvine (2002), Giles (2003), and Fluri (2006, 2008).

[6] See Zinn and Dill (1996), Visweswaran (1997), Kobayashi (2001), Parreñas (2001), and Das and Poole (2004).

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engagement with SSWEN stemmed from a period of activism and volunteer work with the organization, which proved important in developing trust, reciprocity, and collaboration in the research process. We combine this participant work with a textual analysis of varied promotional, grant-based, and intraorganizational materials relating to the event, in-depth interviews with SSWEN members based in the United States and Sudan, and a detailed observation of the dialogue, debate, speeches, and key events of the conference itself.

A history of conflict: Identity, difference, and the emerging role of women

Since Sudan obtained independence from British-Egyptian condominium rule in 1956, it has been marked by political, economic, and cultural disputes over ethnic- and faith-based identity; land, cattle, oil, and water resource management; and regional inequalities in education, economic development, and the distribution of political power.[7] Briefly, the twentieth-century history of Sudan includes two major civil wars between southern rebels and the northern government (1956–72 and 1983–2005) and countless regional and localized conflicts, for example, among rebel factions in the South and between government-sponsored militia and rebels in the western province of Darfur since 2003. In addition to poverty, drought, and disease, these conflicts have resulted in the deaths of nearly 3 million people and the displacement of over 4 million more. In the South, internal divisions evidenced long-standing ethnic-regional struggles among elites in the movement and the class-based divisions between key leaders and those who fought for them. Within the Southern resistance movement, violent conflicts arose and fell along lines of ethnic and regional difference, most notably between Dinkas and Nuers in the early 1990s, an outbreak of violence that resulted in the deaths of thousands of Southern Sudanese (Jok and Hutchinson 1999; Hutchinson 2001; Scroggins 2002). Given this tumultuous history, a Southern Sudanese identity that bridges difference and promotes unity has been promoted in recent years by the main resistance movement, the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and is viewed as vital if the region is to attain autonomy or independence and avoid falling back into conflict.

In January 2005 the SPLM and the government of Sudan signed the CPA. This agreement marked the beginning of a fragile period of peace and tentative reconstruction and development in the South. It includes

[7] See Deng (1995), Wöndu and Lesch (2000), Hutchinson (2001), and Johnson (2003).

power-sharing protocols between Northern and Southern political parties and grants a new measure of autonomy for the South, including the creation of a new Government of South Sudan with its own interim constitution. Perhaps most importantly, the peace agreement includes the promise of a referendum on independence scheduled for 2011. Although corruption, localized outbreaks of violence, and accusations of political inaction continue to threaten relative peace in the South, it is still an exciting period of change. This is particularly so for women, who have played an important yet commonly unacknowledged role in the resistance struggle and connected peace efforts (Fitzgerald 2002; Ringera 2007). Recognition of gender equality between men and women is formally included in the peace agreement and the new Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan, and new laws protecting the legal rights of women have been introduced, including a 25 percent reserve for women in political office. The CPA has also led to a flourishing of civil society, a sphere more open to women's engagement than the government or military (Ringera 2007). This has been facilitated in part by the improved security situation on the ground and fueled by new international channels of funding from development agencies and diasporic networks seeking to support and even center women-in-development work (Palmberg 2004).[8] In part because of these changes, women have begun to work more actively in politics and peace and reconstruction efforts, bringing increasing visibility to their role as activists and social citizens. This engagement has begun to extend beyond Sudan's borders, with more diasporic Sudanese contemplating returning home or visiting family and with the new government soliciting assistance from Sudanese living outside of the country. Women's shifting political role raises important questions about the ideological underpin-

[8] These have most notably included the emphasis upon, and funding toward, development efforts centering gender equality as part of the Millennium Development Goals signed in September 2000 and the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in October of that year, the latter of which acknowledges the unique impact of war on women and the importance of women's participation in peace and security negotiations. However, these more recent moves may be seen as part of a far longer effort to include women in development practices through the women-in-development, women-and-development, and gender-and-development paradigms. Most recently, demands for increased women's participation in the reconstruction process were voiced in April 2005 at the Oslo donor conference for the reconstruction of the new Sudan. These demands were jointly made by Sudanese women delegates representing women from all regions of the South and by delegates from UNIFEM, the Government of Norway, and the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs. This demonstrates a powerful show of support for issues of gender equality, given the scale of funding flowing into the country for reconstruction from the international donors present at the conference (*IRIN* 2005).

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nings of their organizing efforts as well as the challenges and opportunities of building a unified movement amid enduring historical tensions around ethnicity, faith, class, and, more recently, diasporic identity. We explore these issues below with a focus on the work of a new and active transnational organization: SSWEN.

"Weaving Together" a women's movement: Unity and difference in the formation of SSWEN

> SSWEN believes that it is essential that women from all marginalized areas of Sudan and the diaspora network coordinate their efforts and collaborate in nurturing the seed of Sudan's rebirth and renewal.[9]

SSWEN first formed through an electronic Listserv in 2005 and has since emerged as a driver of Southern Sudanese women's transnational activism. In the beginning, it was composed primarily of women (and a few men) in the United States and some women in Sudan who had begun to connect though online conversations. From the start SSWEN leaders represented many ethnic groups from the South, from Dinka to Nuer, Kuku, Shilluk, Anyuak, and Didinga. However, most leaders had some formal education, including university, and thus more power and authority than the average Southern Sudanese woman in the United States or in Sudan. As SSWEN grew in popularity and online membership increased, founders sought to reach out to a diverse range of women and began organizing conferences and fund-raising events throughout the United States. The goal of the meetings was to hear from a broad base of women and to take their testimonies into account while shaping an emerging mission and vision. Women and some men from varying socioeconomic classes, regions, and ethnicities attended early meetings, where heated debates unfolded around women's appropriate roles in society in Sudan and in the diaspora. For example, at the first SSWEN conference in Phoenix, Arizona, in December 2005, women from Minnesota enacted a skit about traditional women's and men's roles, including women gossiping and men yelling, which had the audience rolling with laughter, and then shifted to show how women could get out of the house and into the classroom by telling their husbands

[9] From SSWEN promotional leaflets titled "SSWEN 2008 Conference, Weaving Together, Strategizing for a Just and Sustainable Peace: Asserting the Critical Role of Women." These leaflets were distributed in the welcoming packs provided to delegates and donors.

to watch the children. Laughter continued among some uneasy looks as leaders acknowledged that women's empowerment would be an uphill battle. More specifically, early discussions focused on who could be included as members, whom the organization would reach out to help, and key strategies that SSWEN should adopt. Some argued that a broad mission would be better, while others argued for a Christian mission centered on Southern women. Most agreed that women's empowerment, especially through education and business, was necessary and would better South Sudan and the diaspora.

By January 2006, leaders had decided that Southern Sudanese women in the United States should be SSWEN's target population, and the group formed chapters across the United States and Canada over the course of the year. Among Sudanese women living in the United States, then, the group included only South Sudanese women, and this led to the formation of a Christian group. In this context, diversity within SSWEN revolved primarily around ethnic-regional and class-based differences among women. Central to the broad ethos of the group was women's empowerment with an emphasis on education, income-generating activities, access to welfare and health care, and increased information about and participation in community and political decision-making bodies. From the start, some of the men and women were actively involved with the SPLM, but leaders described the women's movement as apolitical.

As early debates about SSWEN's mission continued during meetings and fund-raising events throughout the United States, violence in Darfur raged, bringing with it international attention to Sudan. SSWEN leaders also began learning about the politics of international granting agencies (e.g., calls for interethnic, secular, or multicultural projects), and by 2007, SSWEN leaders had begun to rethink their mission and vision to include women from all marginalized areas of Sudan. Furthermore, after the CPA was signed in 2005 and more Sudanese began returning to their prewar homes, whether from elsewhere in Sudan or from the diaspora, it became increasingly difficult for SSWEN members to focus their energy in the United States when the needs of women in Sudan seemed to be so much greater. Reflecting on that time, one leader commented: "In terms of empowerment, if you compare the [Sudanese] women in the U.S. and the women here [in Sudan], you know you always feel that the women here need to be included in that process so it is not just us, there feeling empowered. . . . You can see [that the gap] between the educated women and the noneducated women is just huge! And . . . so for me personally,

if we just concentrate on the women who are educated, we are just going to keep growing that huge gap."[10]

In response, in 2007 SSWEN began expanding to locations in Southern Sudan and Khartoum. In this way, political shifts at home in Sudan as well as in the international development arena worked to broaden the identity-based boundaries of SSWEN's work, pushing the group to rethink its level of inclusivity and to strategize ways to build unity along historically fraught lines of difference.

Following leadership training sessions in Washington, DC, in August 2007 and early 2008, leaders decided that the entry point for this work would be a conference in Juba, the capital of the South, which would bring together women leaders from a range of fields and areas of expertise to create a strong and collaborative network of individuals and organizations working to promote and protect women's rights and gender equity measures. The theme of the conference would be "Weaving Together" to echo the desire of SSWEN members to collaborate in efforts to rebuild a peaceful and just new Sudan and to build connections among women across differences. Keen to traverse class-based differences, organizers sought to include "working women" in the formal sectors of business, development work, and government, as well as "grassroots women," who were more likely to be non-English speakers, illiterate, and based in rural areas.[11] Many delegates were involved in local and international nongovernmental (NGO) or political sectors, but there were also women independent of organizations who came from Khartoum, Upper Nile, and Warap States who had little formal schooling or experience in either the NGO or government sectors but were outspoken women with diverse opinions about women's rights in Sudan. Given this emphasis on a unified movement, organizers also intentionally invited women representatives from all ten regions of the South as well as from Darfur and the Nuba Mountains—a task that was both logistically difficult and politically charged. Inviting women from Darfur and the Nuba Mountains added an element of faith-based diversity to the group, since these were primarily

[10] Interview with a SSWEN leader, August 24, 2008.

[11] We have chosen to use the terms "working women" and "grassroots women" here as these were often used during the event both to describe others and to self-identify. "Working women" refers to those employed formally in governmental, nongovernmental, or private sectors for a salary. "Grassroots women" are those deemed to be less privileged, less well educated, less well connected to elite individuals and structures, and more likely to be based in more rural areas of South Sudan. Such women are widely acknowledged as those who have yet to see the benefits of peace and transition in the country. They are viewed as most representative of the majority of those living in the South.

practicing Muslims. To defray possible tensions, SSWEN's organizers continued to promote the organization as apolitical and secular.

Despite these efforts, tensions emerged at the event in relation to conflicts around ethnic-regional affiliation, faith, and class. For example, disagreement arose when the government of Warap State paid for more than a dozen (mostly Dinka) women to attend the SSWEN conference in Juba, leading to their disproportionate representation at the event. This became a point of contention among other delegates, especially those from Equatoria, who felt that their numbers should be the largest because the conference was hosted in their region. Similar disputes over ethnic-regional representation marred opening ceremony events, with regular complaints about inequities in the size of regional delegations.[12] Leaders from the United States argued that Anyuak, Nuer, Shilluk, Darfur, and Nuba women were also in attendance, and thus the conference was not clearly dominated by one ethnic group. In parallel, although organizers had emphasized that SSWEN was secular, there was a strong Christian tone evident, with evening devotionals, speeches by Christian religious leaders, and time set aside on Sunday for Christian prayer and song. In response, Muslim women from Darfur complained that their own faith-based needs had not been equally served. At several points in the conference, arguments erupted over the lack of attention paid to Muslim perspectives, which highlighted how conflicts among women mirror those of the country and the fragility of post-CPA Sudan. Class-based tensions also surfaced regularly during the opening days of the event as women argued that they had long been poorly represented by "working women" in positions of class-based and ethnic-regional privilege. One delegate exemplified such discontent when she said: "Our MPs, the women, our sisters, our eyes. They are supposed to reflect our pain, our misery. But they are not telling our story, not fighting for our rights, they have forgotten us because they will lose their position. We want people that will represent us!"[13] These

[12] These were caused in part by the difficulties of travel from certain regions as well as the tendency for some members of the diaspora to self-identify with their home region rather than with the United States, which inflated certain delegations. Though U.S.-based women saw this as a chance to celebrate their regional origins and connections, the highly politicized nature of place and ethnicity in South Sudan meant that the resulting inflation of certain delegate numbers was viewed as compromising promises of equal representation for many women and as such was a significant source of tension.

[13] This quotation is taken from a smaller breakout session on women's political participation held on August 18, 2008. Here a group of ten women focused their discussion and agenda for action on ways to improve women's representation in the formal political sphere. These words were spoken by a middle-aged woman from a rural area in the South who, like

tensions spoke to a contentious politics of representation demonstrating how class, ethnic-regional, and faith-based conflicts in Southern Sudanese politics are interwoven in women's organizing efforts.

Central to the theme of weaving together, then, was a notion of both diversity and unity—viewed as central to the formation of a grassroots women's movement that was sustainable and transformative and that sought to center bottom-up, women-led, and gender-just development goals and activities. SSWEN's efforts to be inclusive were politically important, but bringing such diverse women together also led to tensions, given the long history of elitism within the resistance struggle, the ethnic-regional tensions within the South itself, and the religious conflict between the predominantly Christian South and the Muslim West and North (Deng 1995; Hutchinson 2001; Johnson 2003). This brief institutional history of SSWEN and its organizing efforts at the conference thus highlights some of the enormous heterogeneities among Sudanese women in terms of ethnicity, faith, educational opportunities, standards of living, and access to political or civic networks of power. So too does this work emphasize the importance SSWEN places on building unity across such difference, some of its strategies for doing so, and both the opportunities and challenges of this project.

Citizenship through empowerment: Promoting self-development as a route to social change

> I am glad that today we have an organization for the empowerment of the women of Southern Sudan. It is my hope that through this organization our women will be empowered to spearhead the process of taking greater control over their lives, setting down their own agendas, gaining skills, building self-confidence, solving problems, and developing self-reliance. This must not only be a collective, social, and political process but an individual one as well. All Southern women should join this bandwagon for their own empowerment.[14]

In its efforts to build unity, SSWEN also sought to bridge potentially destabilizing tensions around identity by emphasizing individual empow-

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most of those in the group, had received limited formal education and was not employed formally in salaried work. Her sentiments mirror those of others in the group who discussed this issue of inadequate representation.

[14] Speech given by H. E. Mary Kiden, Minister for Gender, Social Welfare, and Religious Affairs at the opening of the SSWEN conference, August 17, 2008.

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erment as a process and end point for gender justice. The dominance of articulations of self-improvement proved useful in glossing over historically and structurally produced class-, ethnic-regional-, and faith-based inequalities as well as the disparities between those in the diaspora and those based in Sudan. Central for all SSWEN members was an understanding of empowerment as a path toward belonging and inclusion in wider Sudanese society, a notion intimately tied up with constructions of women as new active citizens of an emerging South Sudan rather than as needy subjects. Barbara Cruikshank (1999, 91) argues that a key component of empowerment is for citizens to develop self-esteem so those in positions of formal power do not need to evaluate or act upon them: by developing self-esteem, citizens enact power themselves, and the state does not have to do so (see also Gupta and Sharma 2006). An early version of SSWEN's Web site highlighted the links the organization makes between empowerment, self-sufficiency, independence, and a reduced burden on the state:

> Our goals are based on the premise that dependency is not empowering and, while charity is a laudable goal, it also builds a dependency that is ultimately demoralizing and unsustainable. . . . SSWEN recognizes the great human potential within each individual, and offers a hand to those in need, rather than a hand-out. We are strongly opposed to the hand-out approach because we believe it destroys personal dignity and initiative.
>
> True charity must emphasize self-help and restore pride and independence. Only in this way can we truly empower Sudanese Women. . . . SSWEN places primary responsibility for success on each woman, and provides an opportunity for women to equip themselves with tools that build self-reliance, and to find and use support from other women.

This emphasis on the self infused conference debate and discussion. Women often connected their lack of self-confidence to their marginalization in society and suggested that their self-improvement through education and training was the best way to achieve greater inclusion and participation in public life. President Lilian Riziq, a Sudanese woman from Wau in the South and a key founder of the organization, worked with the board to develop seven themes for the conference. These were areas where structural gender inequality was seen as most problematic for women: education, health, business, politics, the legal and judicial system, social and family issues, and family violence. Groups were set up around

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each topic with members opting to participate in the group of most interest to them, working together over the week to identify key problems and develop one to three next steps for action. The conference concluded with each group presenting its work to delegates and with a panel of invited experts from the government and NGO sectors, followed by a lengthy period of discussion and debate on each topic.

The most popular group was education, with more than twice the number of delegates than the next largest group. Women who had educated themselves against all odds were viewed as icons for the struggle, and stories of women educating themselves against adversity were centered in speeches, discussion periods, and testimony. Leaders viewed Jacqueline (a pseudonym), one of the earliest and most active members of SSWEN, as an example of an empowered woman because of her efforts to educate herself in Sudan despite considerable challenges. After years of marriage to a much older man that began when she was just thirteen, Jacqueline left her husband and moved her six daughters to Khartoum. She faced multiple hardships and oppression, including the rape of one of her daughters and experience with the deeply patriarchal justice system.[15] Yet Jacqueline educated herself and began working with human rights organizations, eventually taking up a job with the new government of South Sudan. She moved to Juba after the CPA and remains active in government and NGO circles. Jacqueline is an outspoken activist for women's rights, and at the conference she denounced early marriage in favor of formal education and self-improvement as a means to empowerment. As she explained during an interview, "After I bore six children I am still looking for ways to develop myself, because . . . I want to have education. And this is why I am here and I speak this language with you! Yes, English, that is why!"[16] Most delegates agreed that self-improvement through education would be the most effective pathway toward women's empowerment and inclusion in society.

Another key way that self-empowerment was promoted was through faith and spirituality. In fact, SSWEN's notion of empowerment was articulated and defined during church-sponsored training sessions in the United States, where ideas for the conference plans had taken shape, and it was rearticulated during a training held in Juba immediately preceding the conference. A Christian woman from the United States led both of

[15] When Jacqueline went to the police to report the rape of her daughter, they told her she would need four male witnesses to prove the accusation. Since she could not produce these witnesses, her daughter's attacker went unpunished.

[16] Interview conducted August 22, 2008, in Juba, South Sudan.

these trainings, which included Bible stories, inspirational lessons, prayers, and promises that God would change the lives of believing members. The facilitator compared NGO management to small business success, rooting empowerment in individual self-improvement and personal development. During the training, participants openly revered their trainer as they expressed anguish and joy; details of their lives, personal achievements, and goals; and their dreams for SSWEN. This central emphasis on elevating the self was connected to giving one's soul to God during invited speaker sessions by a white American Christian missionary who led song breaks and evening devotionals calling on women to "have a dream!"[17] In essence, as John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff have noted in their work in South Africa, "salvation became healing; enlightenment, education; God's calling, provident enterprise" (1997, 9). With all of the heterogeneities within Sudan, an emphasis on the self and on faith-based initiatives to build unity and solidarity across other kinds of difference (class, ethnicity, region) makes sense and could be considered necessary and strategic. Indeed, this Christian rendering of self-empowerment was one that many delegates connected with, and it worked to build unity among the Christian women who formed the majority of delegates, given its appeal to shared and familiar religious ideals, rhetoric, and practice. Moreover, the emphasis on the individual conferred agency upon women who had long been marginalized, affirming that their efforts were supported by God and assured by their faith.

Discourses of self-esteem, self-empowerment, self-help, and self-improvement such as those we identified at the SSWEN conference have emerged as significant articulations of women's citizenship in the global South (Kabeer 1994; Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006; Sharma 2008), as well as the global North (Cruikshank 1999; Larner 2003). In line with this scholarship we argue that this approach offers potential opportunities for women's political engagement in the reconstruction process through, for example, their education. It can also work to build unity by focusing on individual development and thus eliding identity-based politics rooted in class, faith, or ethnic-regional difference. In this way, women can enact a form of social citizenship, something Aihwa Ong (1996, 737) describes as "a process of self-making and being-made in relation to nation-states and transnational processes." However, following critics of this kind of empowerment, we suggest that this also acts as a neoliberal technology of self-governance that works to shrink the role of the state and shift

[17] Field observations from devotional session at the close of the conference, August 22, 2008.

responsibility to voluntary organizations like SSWEN and to individuals (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Feminist scholars have demonstrated the deeply gendered nature of this process whereby women and men experience the burdens and benefits of neoliberal policy in varied ways (Hart 2002; Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006; Sharma 2008). Because women, the poor, and the politically marginalized are underrepresented in state and other decision-making bodies and overrepresented in the welfare sector, neoliberalism tends to affect these groups in particular most negatively.[18] At the conference, the push for self-empowerment was viewed positively as a way to engage with the state and obtain greater levels of inclusion and gender justice. Ultimately, SSWEN leaders aimed to increase women's collaboration and networking skills from the individual to the national and even international level and in every aspect of society from business to government, childrearing to health care, and NGO work. However, in positioning women as the objects for improvement, this strategy dovetails with, rather than challenges, the patriarchal state and historically entrenched structures of power.

A silent march to social change? Gendering the spaces and scales of women's activism

> It is our duty as women to lobby for our children. You don't only lobby the government but you lobby your husband too.[19]

Despite the liberal and universalist overtones of empowerment promoted at the conference, the kinds of citizenship it called into being at the conference were distinctly gendered. Feminist scholars of citizenship have highlighted how gender, among other markers of difference, shapes the responsibilities of citizens and their unequal access to the benefits of social citizenship, for example, education, medical care, housing, political clout, and respect.[20] The emphasis on the transformation of the self as an avenue to full citizenship and a catalyst for social change involved a distinct scaling

[18] See Goode and Maskovsky (2001), Mohanty (2003), Shields (2004), and Collins, di Leonardo, and Williams (2008). For more on the effects of neoliberalism on the continent of Africa, see Ferguson (2006); on the global South, see, e.g., Aguilar and Herod (2006) and Bush (2007).

[19] Delegate comment, SSWEN conference session on social and family issues, August 19, 2008.

[20] Isin and Wood (1999), Yuval-Davis and Werbner (1999), Ong (2003), Chouinard (2004), and McEwan (2005).

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of women's political subjectivity that focused on women in their everyday lives and linked the body and home to transformations at the nation-state scale as a strategy through which women could gain voice, representation, and greater rights. This kind of a politics of scale in women's political activism often makes strategic links between body, home, and nation, mobilizing distinctly gendered discourses to draw attention to an issue by making it public and by legitimizing claims for recognition, redistribution, or both.[21] Such discourses can include notions of women's moral authority, of women as reproducers and nurturers of the family and nation, as icons of cultural tradition, or as symbols of national integrity (Enloe 1990; Jok 1998, 2001; Giles and Hyndman 2004). In connection, women at the conference were encouraged to take advantage of their essentialized positioning as women, mothers, and negotiators, a form of women's activism undoubtedly shaped by the religious Christian conservatism infusing the event and by notions of a fixed and authentic Sudanese cultural heritage that both organizers and participants repeatedly referenced in speeches, organizational literatures, and debates. These influences worked to position an essentialized construction of womanhood at the foundation of the movement.

Organizational literature, including grant applications, welcoming letters, fund-raising materials, and SSWEN's Web site imagery, combined images of strong women with messages of women's activism as channeled through roles and responsibilities traditionally gendered as female. The logo of the organization itself, which adorned all literature connected to the event, featured a woman carrying a child on her back and holding a book to her chest, symbolically positioning women both as mothers and teachers/learners. In the first media interview just minutes after organizers touched down at Juba airport, SSWEN's public relations officer responded to a question on women's activism by arguing that women are "instinct-driven to be mothers and carers" and as such are well positioned to address social problems of youth and community.[22] In addition, the welcoming address to the delegates called upon them to "communicate to one another the issues of South Sudan at hand concerning women and children—and [to] make plans on ways we can resolve them. We will connect spiritually through daily devotions, work in workshops, and present our

[21] See Enloe (1990), Massey (1994), McClintock (1995), Silvey (2003), and Mayer (2004).

[22] These words are taken from field notes of an interview of a leading SSWEN member and a journalist in Juba, South Sudan, recorded August 18, 2008.

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ideas to one another—coming together as Sudanese sisters, women working together to bandage up the hurts of our child, South Sudan."[23]

In fact many speakers and delegates described women's privileged and natural maternal traits as positioning them as responsible for the nation's care work. One speaker argued that "with a good approach and a good spirit your husband can be encouraged to make better decisions."[24] This resonates with the opening quote of this section where notions of political lobbying are transferred to the space of the home. In a discussion on young girls' health, education, and marital age, women were repeatedly positioned as knowing best for them and as responsible for ensuring their development, safety, and well-being in lieu of male figures in their lives, the state, or broader society. One woman noted, "Who is responsible for the household duties? It is you, women. You prepare food, and it is us that give the duties to the girls. When I was in school I would come home and be asked what food was in the kitchen. My brothers could wait and rest and do their homework, they were free, but I had to rush to my room and change out of my uniform and get to work. . . . Let us understand now that we as women have to give the opportunity to our girls."[25]

This emphasis on essentialized notions of womanhood and privatized, feminized strategies of women's activism was not without contention. Although terms such as "empowerment," "rights," and "equality" were regularly deployed in speeches, commentary, and discussion, there was considerable contestation around their meaning (see Mama 2002; Helms 2003) and the implications for women in Sudan and broader Sudanese society. A number of women argued that the home and the institution of the family represented a key form of oppression for women in society that required structural changes at the state scale and a restructuring of the formal political, legal, and judicial systems rather than simply an individualized renegotiation of power through feminine tactics. Although such concerns were articulated by delegates from both the diaspora and Sudan, many conference attendees argued that diasporic women had come to forward their own liberal and Western ideals of women's empowerment and women's rights that threatened to erode traditional Sudanese values.

[23] Text taken from a letter written by SSWEN members that welcomed women to the conference. This was part of a welcoming pack provided to all delegates at the start of the event.

[24] These conversations were taken from field note observations of discussions during a conference session on social and family issues, August 19, 2008.

[25] These conversations were taken from field note observations of discussions during a conference session on social and family issues, August 19, 2008.

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Unsurprisingly, these tensions around strategies for change surfaced most prominently in debates around family issues such as early marriage, bride wealth, polygamy, and divorce and around the role of women as mothers and wives. One of the U.S.-based organizers of the event described women's reactions to her critical comments on family and social issues: "You hear 'Oh you and your American ideas! You are completely American! . . . So is this what you really want us women to do? To stop violence against women? Are you crazy? What are you thinking!' Another said to me, 'and you have the guts to stand up there and translate about polygamy when your father has eight wives' and issues like that because every time we say something, especially for us [in the diaspora], they just feel it is arrogant. It is just because you are educated and you are arrogant. And you don't fit in."[26]

Members of the diaspora sometimes voiced these differences starkly, with one younger delegate, who was on her first trip back to the South in over fifteen years stating in a discussion session, "If I lived here now I would be married with four kids! Early marriage is taking Sudan back to the Stone Age!" Such comments worked negatively to heighten tensions between the diaspora and women based in Sudan though most visitors were very sensitive to these feelings and tried hard to highlight commonalities between them rather than differences. In one example a member of the diaspora described a story of her own niece's early marriage and bride wealth in Australia, arguing that "this is also a problem for us, it does not leave our communities when we leave Sudan" (see also Shandy 2007). In discussions about domestic violence, a male speaker insisted that women should consider divorce and legal challenges to access a husband's wealth if mediation was not successful in resolving the issue. One woman stood to say, "Here we don't have 911 and we can't just go to the courts and expect to get compensated if we choose to leave. Today we are still fighting for our basic rights! It is not easy for us to do this thing and leave." She was widely supported by others and was followed by a second woman who insisted, "Women have killed themselves after divorce rather than be left destitute without their children . . . how can you ask us to leave?"[27] While Sharon Hutchinson (1996) has documented an increased prevalence of divorce in the South (at least among some

[26] Interview conducted August 24, 2008, during the conference. The interview was conducted in English and transcribed by the authors. Transcripts are on file with the authors.

[27] All quotations in this paragraph are from discussions during a conference session on social and family issues, August 19, 2008. For more on domestic violence in Southern Sudanese communities in the United States, see Holtzman (2000).

Nuer) since the 1980s, few women at the SSWEN conference seemed willing to discuss divorce rates among Sudanese in Sudan, preferring to blame high divorce rates on wayward Sudanese in the diaspora who had been corrupted by liberal, Western ways. Thus women emphasized, out of necessity, the need to negotiate through feminized, informal forms of activism, particularly those located in the scales of the home and body, rather than ways to challenge unjust marital laws, conservative attitudes toward divorce, or oppression through formal state-based channels.

On the final day of the conference, a silent march provided an interesting moment to observe the tensions around appropriate and effective forms of activism and the distinctly feminized rescripting of a public engagement with the state. Young Southern Sudanese women based in Juba called for the march to demand that Southern Sudanese President Salva Kiir sign the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women—a liberal tool that seeks to restructure the public sphere as part of the process of women's empowerment. In this way, street protest and efforts to challenge the state countered the emphasis on self rather than society and the emphasis on feminine acts and spaces of resistance. However, organizers from the local Juba-based committee were keen to deploy a distinctly feminine approach, drawing on a demure and respectful performance to convey their message. They organized a small fleet of vans, trucks, and cars to take over 150 women from the conference hotel to downtown Juba with a goal to march silently to the government buildings. The organizers were adamant that the tone be one of deference and not defiance. One organizer stressed, "We should not be violent, but we cannot be so passive we do nothing," while another mirrored this stance while outlining the final plans to the delegates: "Our march will be silent because SSWEN wants to be seen as peaceful not protesting."[28] Thus, while the march began noisily with delegates pointing at men and chanting slogans like "Don't beat your wife!" and "End violence against women!" once the group reached the ministerial buildings they fell silent. Amid the media frenzy, they stood quietly as the president, his wife, and several other suited men and women from the ministerial offices came out to shake the SSWEN president's hand.

The decision to deploy feminine forms of political activism resonated with the essentialized notions of womanhood that underpinned the conference, yet this decision can also be read as a strategic performance

[28] This quote is taken from observations of the debate and discussion among women before the march on August 24, 2008. The women who spoke these words were two young Southern Sudanese organizers who were coordinating the march.

through which to facilitate a more open engagement with the state. Acting respectfully, demurely, silently—in short, acting as women "should"—enabled SSWEN to garner the support of local organizers, conference delegates, and a wider public who were wary of Western feminisms. All this made it possible for SSWEN to navigate tight security controls around the ministerial offices and to organize within contemporary political constraints in a fragile period of postconflict transition. The prevailing emphasis on feminized and privatized activism may denote a depoliticizing of women's activism and a withdrawal from efforts to engage with politics in the public sphere. However, it may also suggest a politicization of these spaces and scales and an understanding of them as valuable sites of resistance and empowerment as feminist scholars such as Doreen Massey (1994) and Lynn A. Staehlei, Eleonore Korman, and Linda Peake (2004) have suggested is evident elsewhere. Although the emphasis on women in the home represents a narrow strategy for activism, we would suggest that this is a gendered form of resistance to oppression rooted in the particular constraints women face in Southern Sudan, one that resonates with methods long deployed by women there to resist and rework systems of oppression within the scope of acceptable norms of female activity (Hutchinson 1996; Jok 1998). We also see in these efforts a rescaling of citizenship to include acts of state engagement through groups such as the family and community (Chouinard 2004; Secor 2004; McEwan 2005). As such, a more diffuse notion of social citizenship is articulated whereby acts once privatized, feminized, or otherwise depoliticized may be reconceptualized as civic, political, and social acts of citizenship.

Conclusion

When diasporic SSWEN members stepped onto the tarmac at Juba airport and made their public statement advocating women's empowerment, they strategically joined the clamor of voices participating in the discourse on citizenship in South Sudan. Through its organization of the conference and its placement of women's bodies in the streets of Juba as activists for gender justice, SSWEN also centered women as members of this struggling emerging state. In our article we have examined how practices of social citizenship and political activism are being articulated in contemporary South Sudan through notions of empowerment that are deeply gendered and contested within the diverse women's movement. Recognizing that this process is at times both liberatory and oppressive, we outlined how SSWEN members utilized discourses on liberal democratic citizenship and

the ideology of empowerment to challenge multiple, overlapping regimes of power that have consistently marginalized and violated women. As long as the political economic situation in South Sudan remains unstable, the definitions and manifestations of South Sudanese women's empowerment can be seen as a strong form of hope and resistance to multiple forms of oppression, providing women with a crucial sense of personal power and self-worth in a patriarchal, war-torn society. However, we also argue that as a form of neoliberal governmentality, empowerment strategies place additional demanding burdens upon individual women within a largely unaccountable state system with precious few resources.

In our analysis we have paid attention to the sites of contestation evident in debates around women's citizenship, empowerment, and appropriate strategies for activism that surfaced in the many speeches, presentations, and debates at the conference. These tensions highlight the fluid and contested multiplicity of South Sudanese notions of women's rights articulated at the event and the challenges in building a unified and transnational women's movement. In this way we contribute to transnational feminist analyses that have examined the production and reception of varied feminisms across, for example, faith-, race-, and class-based difference by considering the tensions and opportunities rooted in differing experiences of conflict, displacement, and resettlement. Such discourses and practices at once produce and solidify difference and offer insight into the ways in which cultural, geographic, historical, and political economic factors influence feminism. Moreover, in centering the women of SSWEN we have sought to highlight the ways in which members of the diaspora are both privileged and challenged in their efforts to connect and engage with women at home. We call for further work on forms of African transnational feminism, particularly as they are beginning to influence regions such as South Sudan embarking on a tumultuous, fragile, and dynamic moment of sociopolitical change.

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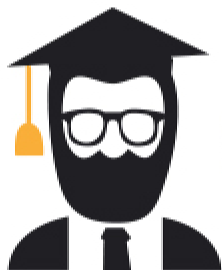
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