



Beyond women's participation: lessons for peacebuilding from women's embodied governance in a South Sudan borderland

Dr Diana Felix da Costa

Introduction

Peacebuilding and gender policy in conflict-affected contexts commonly measures women's political agency through representation in peace negotiations, leadership positions, community committees, or civil society organisations.¹ Such approaches have helped challenge exclusion and expand women's representation. However, as the *Kabarze* grassroots movement in South Sudan's eastern borderlands illustrates, they can overlook the ways women already govern, exercise authority and regulate violence in their communities. This policy brief highlights implications for policy where governance is sustained through social relationships, moral obligations, and culturally recognised forms of authority, alongside or sometimes in the absence of state institutions.²

Key findings and policy considerations

- **The Kabarze are a decentralised grassroots movement of Murle mothers and grandmothers in Greater Pibor, South Sudan.** Emerging organically in 2017 in response to escalating violence between their sons from competing Murle youth age-sets (socially recognised generations of young men), the *Kabarze* use song, dance, public shaming and the threat of maternal nudity to interrupt violence, compel compliance and restore accountability when established authorities struggled to regulate armed youth.
- **The Kabarze illustrate embodied governance in practice, showing how women already exercise political authority through culturally recognised forms of action.** Rooted in motherhood, kinship, collective action, shared moral understandings

1 Andrea Cornwall, 'Unpacking "Participation" Models, Meanings and Practices', *Community Development Journal* 43, no. 3 (2008): 269–83; Steven Dixon et al., *Making Women Count - Not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women's Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations* (2016).

2 This policy brief draws on the author's forthcoming article entitled "'Our breasts are the ones to stop these things': Maternal authority and embodied governance in a South Sudan borderland'. It is based on long-term ethnographic research in Greater Pibor conducted by Diana Felix da Costa between 2011 and 2024 and by Kongkong Marshal Babanen between 2023 and 2024, including participant observation, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and audio and visual recordings with *Kabarze* women, elders, youth, chiefs, and government officials.

and embodied performance, this authority enabled women to regulate violence, enforce accountability and compel compliance.

- **Gender programming needs to look beyond formal participation indicators.** Women who held no formal political position were able to interrupt fighting, compel young men to surrender weapons and enforce cattle compensation, showing the need to map influence, legitimacy and capacity to act alongside representation.
- **Peacebuilding programming should start by considering how conflict has reshaped authority alongside where authority formally resides.** Grounding programme design in an analysis of how conflict and militarisation have reshaped relations between generations, genders, customary authorities and the state helps to identify who can influence behaviour, regulate violence and generate compliance.
- **Mapping authority means mapping relationships and sources of legitimacy.** Age-set structures, spiritual authorities, women's networks, kinship relations and locally recognised sanctions may all shape how violence is governed; conflict and political economy analyses can examine the cultural codes and social relationships through which authority becomes socially meaningful and capable of generating compliance, alongside institutional structures.
- **Peacebuilding programming should recognise and respect the ways communities organise themselves as part of understanding how authority is produced and sustained.** The *Kabarze* spread through decentralised groups embedded within individual communities, with women adapting their interventions to local circumstances. Their organisational form was closely connected to the social relationships through which their authority was recognised and exercised.
- **External support can alter the relationships through which grassroots authority is recognised and sustained.** As the *Kabarze* became associated with government, NGOs and international organisations, young men perceived

them differently, weakening the cultural authority through which their interventions had carried force.

- **Practitioners should consider what formalisation may change before funding or restructuring grassroots initiatives.** Introducing leaders, committees, reporting requirements, funding or institutional affiliations can alter the relationships that sustain legitimacy; effective engagement may begin with careful observation and restraint.
- **Authority may be communicated through bodies, voices, movement and performance.** Conflict analysis and consultation should look beyond spoken words and also consider embodied forms of communication and action – song, dance, gesture, public shaming, ritual and other culturally meaningful repertoires – asking what political work they perform and how communities understand their authority.

Detail

The limitations of peacebuilding interventions in borderland contexts

Conflict-affected borderlands are often approached as spaces of weak governance, institutional absence, and chronic insecurity.³ Peacebuilding interventions consequently tend to prioritise strengthening state institutions, supporting customary authorities, and creating formal mechanisms for dialogue and mediation.⁴ Within this broader approach, gender policy has placed particular emphasis on increasing women's representation and participation in formal decision-making.⁵

Women's political agency is commonly measured through representation in peace negotiations, leadership positions, community committees, or civil society organisations.⁶ While these approaches have helped challenge exclusion and expand women's representation, they can overlook the ways in which women already govern, exercise authority and regulate violence outside of formal institutions.

Located along South Sudan's eastern border with Ethiopia, Greater Pibor, the home of the Murle

3 Benedikt Korf and Timothy Raeymaekers, eds, *Violence on the Margins: States, Conflict, and Borderlands*, 1st edn, Palgrave Series in African Borderlands Studies (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Christopher Vaughan et al., eds, *The Borderlands of South Sudan: Authority and Identity in Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, 1st edn, Palgrave Series in African Borderlands Studies (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

4 Séverine Autesserre, 'International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness', *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (2017): 114–32.

5 Laura Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Security: Discourse as Practice* (Zed Books, 2008).

6 Cornwall, 'Unpacking "Participation" Models'; Dixon et al., *Making Women Count*.

people, has experienced decades of marginalisation, armed conflict, and limited state presence.⁷ Cattle-raiding, child abductions, and cycles of revenge have intensified, while customary authorities and government institutions have struggled to regulate increasingly militarised youth.⁸

Yet governance has not disappeared.⁹ Authority in Greater Pibor continues to operate through kinship networks, age-set systems, spiritual authority, and other socially embedded forms of organisation.¹⁰ Moral obligations, collective action, and culturally recognised forms of sanction play a central role in regulating behaviour, managing violence, and enforcing accountability.¹¹

Drawing on the author's extended research with Murle communities in Greater Pibor, this policy brief examines the emergence of the *Kabarze*,¹² a decentralised movement of Murle mothers and grandmothers that successfully intervened to halt youth violence.¹³

Women and the governance of violence

In 2017, violence between competing Murle youth age-sets¹⁴ escalated across Greater Pibor. Elders and chiefs increasingly struggled to regulate armed youth.¹⁵ For many women, the stakes were immediate: their own sons were killing and being killed.

Women described their own intervention as a response to this breakdown in generational authority. As one *Kabarze* woman explained: 'We formed

the *Kabarze* so our children would survive all this fighting. Boys weren't listening to the old men, they beat the old men, so we formed our group. (...) If they are to beat us, they'll know we carried them for nine months and gave birth to them.'¹⁶

The *Kabarze* first emerged organically among mothers and grandmothers in one locality and subsequently spread across Greater Pibor as women in other communities established their own *Kabarze* groups, adapting a shared repertoire of intervention to their particular circumstances. As another woman explained, capturing a message repeatedly enacted through the movement's performances: 'If you want to kill each other, you must kill us first.'¹⁷

Women moved collectively between the homesteads of armed youth, singing, dancing and addressing those involved in the fighting. Their songs named responsibility and exposed young men's actions to public scrutiny; collective dancing made women's intervention publicly visible; social sanctions imposed consequences on those held responsible; and the threat of maternal nudity provided an ultimate form of coercion.

7 Diana Felix da Costa, 'The Politics of Being Murle in South Sudan: State Violence, Displacement and the Narrativisation of Identity', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 17, no. 3 (2023): 404–23; Diana Felix da Costa, "'This Word, It Is for Murle, Not Meant for Other People': The Politics of Murle Identity, Experiences of Violence and of the State in Boma, South Sudan' (PhD Dissertation, SOAS University of London, 2016); Edward Thomas, *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation* (Zed Books, 2015).

8 Diana Felix da Costa, 'The Rumor-Myth of Infertility and Abduction: Murle Exclusion and the Politics of Life in South Sudan', *African Studies Review* 69, no. 1 (2026): 71–94.

9 Diana Felix da Costa and Gola Boyoi Gola, 'Navigating the Complex Webs of Murle Authority in Pibor: Conflict Sensitivity Considerations for Aid Actors', *Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility South Sudan*, 27 June 2023.

10 Diana Felix da Costa, *Embodied Knowledge and Performative Storytelling in South Sudan: Murle Youth, Conflict and Social Change* (James Currey Ltd, forthcoming).

11 Diana Felix da Costa, *Changing Power Among Murle Chiefs: Negotiating Political, Military and Spiritual Authority in Boma State, South Sudan*, South Sudan Customary Authorities Project (Rift Valley Institute, 2018).

12 Diana Felix da Costa, *The Kabarze: a novel platform for women's involvement in age-set tensions* (Murle Heritage, 2022).

13 Felix da Costa, *Embodied Knowledge*; Kongkong Marshal Babanen, *When Women Sing: How Murle Women Use Arts and Cultural Mediums to Communicate* (Rift Valley Institute, 2025). For an extended discussion on this topic see the XCEPT-funded academic article by D. Felix da Costa (forthcoming) 'Embodied governance and women's public authority in a South Sudan borderland'.

14 Murle Heritage, *Age-Sets*.

15 Diana Felix da Costa, *Changing Power*.

16 FGD *Kabarze* Manyumen, 06/09/2019.

17 FGD *Kabarze* Manyumen, 06/09/2019.



Figures 1 and 2. Photographs of Kabarze women singing and dancing in Manyirany payam in Pibor county in September 2017 (photographs by Diana Felix da Costa).

These performances did political work, transforming collective action into a site of confrontation and discipline.¹⁸ Women interrupted imminent violence, demanded cattle compensation, and compelled young men to surrender weapons. As one woman explained: '[h]e [who started the fight] has to pay us a cow and we eat it all together. This discourages the boys from fighting.'¹⁹ Performance itself was a means through which accountability was enacted and violence regulated.

Their effectiveness rested on more than persuasion alone. The *Kabarze* exercised authority through culturally recognised forms of legitimacy and coercion rooted in motherhood, kinship, obligation, shame, and collective responsibility. As one woman explained, 'Everyone walking here on earth came out of a woman and for that they must listen to a woman.'²⁰ Maternal authority gave these interventions a further coercive force. The threat of nudity was reserved for moments when other forms of intervention failed:

*'If they don't stop fighting, we'll take all our clothes off so they fear us and run away. (...) Our breasts are the ones to stop these things, and removing our clothes makes them listen to us. If they need to die, we will die with them. If they don't want to listen to us, let us die with them.'*²¹

Maternal nudity transformed relationships of kinship into a mechanism of coercion.²² By exposing the body that had given life, women invoked culturally embedded understandings of motherhood, shame, and obligation that armed youth could neither easily dismiss nor confront. The maternal body itself was a source of political authority capable of compelling compliance.

Through these interventions, the *Kabarze* regulated violence and enforced accountability while creating a space for women to exercise political authority and become more visible in public life on their own terms.

Why current gender policy often overlooks women's agency in peacebuilding

The *Kabarze* expose a gap between how political authority operates and how peacebuilding programmes often identify it. Governance mapping, stakeholder assessments, and conflict analyses organised around formal roles can leave influential actors largely invisible. In Greater Pibor, elders and chiefs occupied recognised positions of authority, yet struggled to regulate armed youth. Mothers and grandmothers acting collectively, however, succeeded in interrupting fighting, enforcing cattle

18 For other contexts see Angela Impey, *Song Walking: Women, Music, and Environmental Justice in an African Borderland* (University of Chicago Press, 2018); Judith Van Allen, "'Sitting on a Man": Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 6:2 (1972): 165–81.

19 FGD *Kabarze* Kondako, 04/09/2019.

20 KII Mama Mary, Pibor town 08/02/2024.

21 FGD *Kabarze* Manyumen, 06/09/2019.

22 Naminata Diabate, *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa* (Duke University Press, 2020).

compensation, and compelling young men to surrender weapons.

These dynamics also shape how women's political agency is recognised. The *Kabarze* exercised influence through social relationships and culturally meaningful repertoires that carried authority among the young men themselves. Song, collective performance, maternal authority, and social sanction enabled women to intervene directly in violence without requiring formal political positions.

Recognising these embodied practices as forms of governance changes the questions peacebuilding actors need to ask. Identifying who holds formal office provides one dimension of the political landscape; understanding who can mobilise collective action, enforce accountability, and generate compliance reveals another. The experience of the *Kabarze* therefore points towards approaches that map political authority through its effects and sources of legitimacy alongside institutional position.

These repertoires can be particularly significant for women whose access to recognised spaces of public speech and decision-making is constrained. Song, dance, collective performance, and embodied action provide socially legible ways of communicating political claims and exercising authority in public life. Gender policy frameworks centred on formal participation and recognised forms of public voice can therefore struggle to capture these less institutionally visible expressions of political agency. Paying attention to how women communicate and enact authority expands what becomes visible as political participation and governance.

The risks of formalising grassroots authority

As the *Kabarze* became known for their effectiveness in managing youth violence, they attracted increasing attention from government, NGOs, development agencies, and international peacebuilding organisations. This attention brought resources, including funding for a *Kabarze* women's centre in Pibor,²³ while also introducing new expectations about how the movement should be organised, represented and institutionalised.

The *Kabarze* operated through decentralised networks embedded within individual communities, with women adapting their interventions to local circumstances. Authority remained grounded in social relationships, kinship obligations, motherhood, and

collective moral responsibility. External organisations, however, often required identifiable interlocutors and organisational structures through which engagement could take place. One *Kabarze* member recalled being asked to identify the movement's leader. The women selected one because engagement with outsiders appeared to require it. A decentralised form of collective authority was thereby translated into an organisational structure more legible to external institutions.

As the *Kabarze* became increasingly associated with government, NGOs, and international peacebuilding actors, they also began to lose some of the cultural authority on which their influence depended. Growing association with institutional power changed how they were perceived by young men and altered the relationships through which their authority had previously been recognised. Young men who responded to them as mothers acting through shared cultural codes and obligations did not respond in the same way to women increasingly perceived as connected to government or externally funded organisations.

This reflects a wider pattern in international peacebuilding and development practice. Grassroots initiatives are frequently encouraged to adopt organisational structures, leadership arrangements, and reporting systems that mirror donor expectations. These arrangements may strengthen accountability to funders, but they weaken the social relationships through which authority is exercised locally. In contexts such as Greater Pibor, legitimacy cannot simply be transferred into institutional forms without changing the very basis of authority.

Effective external engagement requires a careful understanding of how legitimacy is produced and maintained within local contexts, with support designed to strengthen existing forms of authority while preserving the relationships on which they depend. At times, the most effective form of engagement may be restraint: recognising when existing forms of authority are working and giving them the space to operate.

Policy considerations

The experience of the *Kabarze* has implications beyond South Sudan. Across many conflict-affected borderlands, governance is sustained through social relationships, moral obligations, and culturally recognised forms of authority, alongside or sometimes in the absence of state

23 United Nations Development Programme, 'A Centre for Greater Pibor's Peacebuilding Women', UNDP, 18 June 2021.

institutions. Peacebuilding interventions benefit from understanding how authority already operates and is communicated, who can exercise it, and the relationships through which legitimacy is produced and sustained.

1. Design peacebuilding approaches from borderland political realities

Greater Pibor illustrates the importance of grounding programme design in an understanding of how conflict has reshaped political and social relations. Prolonged conflict and militarisation transformed established forms of ritualised competition between youth. Elders and chiefs increasingly struggled to regulate armed youth, while mothers and grandmothers acting collectively were able to interrupt fighting, enforce cattle compensation, and compel their sons to surrender weapons. The *Kabarze* emerged organically within these changing relations.

Borderland programming therefore needs to begin by identifying how conflict has reshaped authority alongside where authority formally resides. Which actors can influence behaviour and regulate violence? Through which relationships and forms of legitimacy? How have conflict and militarisation changed relations between generations, genders, customary authorities, and the state? Grounding programme design in these dynamics allows peacebuilding to engage with the political order that exists in practice and the forms of authority through which communities regulate violence.

2. Look beyond participation to identify political authority

Gender programming benefits from complementing participation indicators with attention to influence, legitimacy, and the capacity to act. In Greater Pibor, women who held no formal political position were able to interrupt fighting, compel young men to surrender weapons, and enforce cattle compensation. Governance mapping, conflict analysis, and programme design can therefore ask: Who can intervene effectively when violence occurs? Who can compel compliance or enforce accountability? Whose authority is recognised, by whom, and why? How are women already exercising authority?

3. Map relationships and sources of legitimacy alongside institutions

Understanding who exercises authority also requires attention to how that authority is produced. In Greater Pibor, the *Kabarze* drew their influence from

motherhood, kinship, age, collective action, and shared moral understandings. Age-set structures, spiritual authorities, women's networks, kinship relations, and locally recognised mechanisms of sanction may all shape how violence is regulated and governed. Conflict and political economy analysis can examine the relationships and cultural codes through which authority becomes socially meaningful and capable of generating compliance, alongside institutional structures.

4. Consider what external engagement may change

The *Kabarze* developed through decentralised groups embedded within individual communities. Growing association with government, NGOs, and international organisations altered how young men perceived the women, weakening the cultural authority through which their interventions had previously carried force.

Before formalising or funding a grassroots initiative, practitioners may consider: What makes this initiative legitimate? What relationships sustain its authority? How might introducing leaders, committees, reporting requirements, funding, or institutional affiliations alter those relationships? Effective engagement sometimes begins with careful observation and restraint, allowing existing forms of authority to operate before interfering or introducing new institutional arrangements.

5. Listen to how authority is communicated

Political authority and governance may be expressed through bodies, voices, movement, performance, and social sanction alongside meetings, organisations, and spoken deliberation. Among the *Kabarze*, songs named responsibility and encoded memory; collective dancing created public confrontation and interruption; cattle sanctions enforced accountability; and maternal nudity could compel armed youth to withdraw or respond to women's demands. Listening therefore extends beyond spoken words to embodied forms of communication and action.

Conflict analysis and consultation processes can pay attention to song, dance, voice, gesture, public shaming, ritual, and other culturally meaningful repertoires, asking what political work they perform and how communities themselves understand their authority.

About the author

Diana Felix da Costa is an anthropologist and researcher whose work focuses on conflict, governance and political authority in South Sudan. Her research draws on long-term ethnographic engagement with Murle communities in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area, where she has conducted research since 2011. Her work explores how authority and political knowledge are produced and communicated through embodied and performative practices, including song and dance, and what these reveal about social change, belonging, generational and gender relations, and ways of navigating uncertainty and conflict. Her work bridges academic research and applied policy and practice, including previous roles with UNMISS, the Danish Refugee Council and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). She is an Associate Researcher at SOAS University of London and is currently completing a book on youth, embodied politics and generational authority among the Murle, forthcoming with James Currey.

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