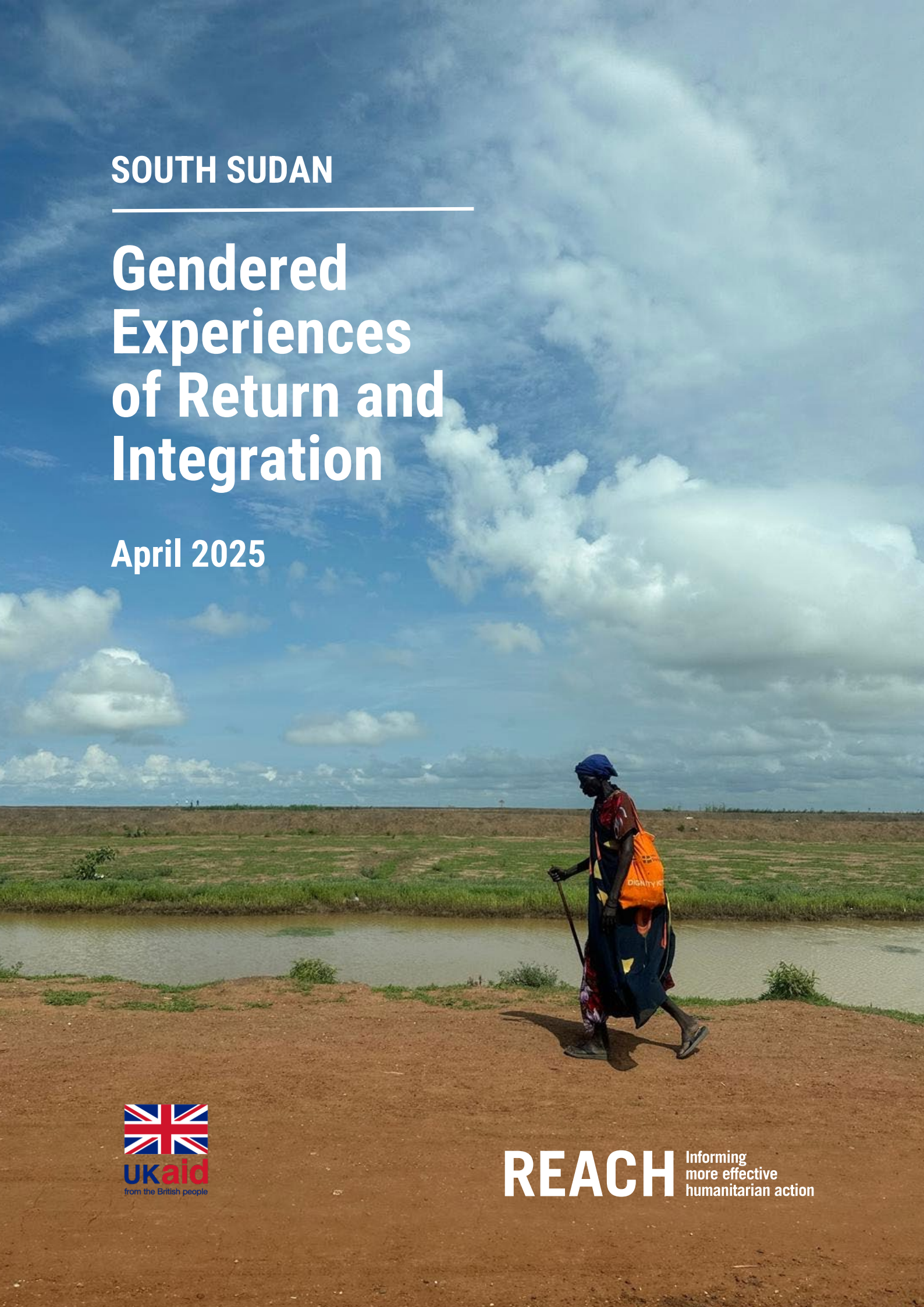
SOUTH SUDAN

# Gendered Experiences of Return and Integration

April 2025



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# SUMMARY

## Rationale

**As of February 2025, the conflict in Sudan has resulted in over 1 million displaced individuals crossing the border into South Sudan, the majority of whom are returnees.** These returnees endure arduous journeys, conflict-related trauma, and arrive in South Sudan with minimal financial or social resources. Stories of severe suffering and human rights violations are widespread. Women and girls, who constitute the majority of recently displaced persons, are highly vulnerable and require substantial support across different sectors to meet their basic needs, including protection services.

**Large-scale displacement from Sudan has put pressure on governmental, humanitarian, and development actors in South Sudan to provide shelter and basic services.** To decongest border and transit areas, onward transportation is a key priority. However, many of the locations where returnees settle already face severe service deficits, straining host communities now forced to share limited resources. Furthermore, despite a needs-based approach to aid, gaps in returnees' access to aid persist, which may reflect broader social vulnerabilities, increasing the risk of tensions and conflict.

**Limited qualitative research exists on the return and settlement experiences of female returnees from Sudan, particularly their integration into host communities.** Understanding social integration is crucial to assessing whether returnees receive adequate support, especially for gender-based violence (GBV) survivors, and whether services are accessible and appropriate. Addressing these gaps can help humanitarian, development, and governmental actors design community-centred programs that promote integration and accountability.

## Methodology

**The overall aim of this assessment was to provide a qualitative deep-dive into female returnees' experiences with their displacement from Sudan, and female returnees' and female host community members' experiences with the integration of returnees into communities in areas of settlement in South Sudan.** The assessment consisted of two distinct components, each with their own main objective:

1. To explore female returnees' and female host community members' perspectives on the Social Integration of female returnees into areas of settlement in the selected locations, by assessing markers of Social Inclusion and Social Cohesion
2. To better understand GBV response service delivery in areas of settlement in the selected locations, focusing on the availability, accessibility, and acceptability of these services, particularly for female returnees.

**Primary data collection followed a qualitative approach**. Data was collected in January and February 2025, in two purposively selected locations with high populations of settled returnees: Fashoda and Juba. A total of eleven Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with female returnees and female host community members. A total of thirty Individual Interviews (IIs) were conducted with female returnees. A total of fifteen Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with experts on GBV service delivery in the assessed areas. The primary data collected was supported by a secondary data review, used to triangulate the findings and better situate the findings in the broader scope of the humanitarian response in South Sudan.

**This report presents the findings related to the first research objective of the assessment.** All findings related to objective 2 are presented in a separate brief.

## Key findings

### (a) Despite potential barriers hindering freedom of movement, most returnees in Juba and Fashoda reached their intended area of settlement – and recognized the importance of onward transportation assistance in having done so

This assessment's findings showed that returnees' **pathways of return were based on continuous risk-mitigating decisions** and were often a sum of several movements. **Freedom of movement largely depended on returnees' access to financial resources**, underpinning observations from previous assessments that new arrivals may increasingly be those who are facing considerable financial barriers to movement. This trend suggests that a disproportionate number of poorer, more vulnerable individuals may enter South Sudan throughout the second half of 2025. Additionally, some female returnees reported limited decision-making power over whether to stay or relocate.

While all forms of humanitarian assistance en route were appreciated by female returnees, they were often insufficient to meet basic needs. Among these, **onward transportation assistance was identified as the most critical enabler of movement** and, in many cases, a prerequisite. Considering humanitarian program closures in response to the sharp global decline in funding in the beginning of 2025[1], mobility may potentially be further restricted, resulting in further congesting already overcrowded border and transit areas.[2]

Despite potential challenges in transportation, **most female returnees reported residing in their intended settlement areas, with family reunification cited as the primary pull factor**. Only a small proportion of participants expressed their intention to move further. While previous assessments conducted in areas of settlement found a considerable proportion of returnees expressing the wish to return to Sudan, findings showed that most intended to relocate within South Sudan. While recognizing that decisions to relocate are based on a variety of risk-mitigating factors, one potential contributing factor could be the recent escalation of violence in several of the southern states of Sudan – making South Sudan, despite widely recognized challenging conditions in areas of settlement, an increasingly preferable relocation option.

### (b) Upon arrival in their area of settlement in Juba or Fashoda, returnees were extremely vulnerable – with conditions in these areas potentially resulting in them entering a downward spiral of vulnerability

#### (i) Findings showed that severe challenges faced en route - particularly in Sudan - have placed female returnees in a vulnerable position, with low self-reliance and high levels of trauma negatively affecting their mental health

**While journeys within South Sudan were perceived as less arduous than those in Sudan, female returnees still faced significant difficulties**, especially during boat travel from Renk (Upper Nile State) onwards. In previous studies, such challenges reportedly led returnees to opt out of boat travel; however, this was not observed in the current study. This may indicate fewer alternative travel options or growing desperation among returnees.

Based on participants' accounts, **return processes could be characterised as traumatic experiences**. Indeed, several participants specifically reported having been traumatised by their return process. Without immediate mental health support, trauma worsens, increasing the risk of anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Furthermore, in the absence of adequate protection services, returnees—particularly women and children—remain highly vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and trafficking.

### (ii) While findings indicated social inclusion of female returnees into host communities in Juba and Fashoda, several indications were observed of female returnees facing increased barriers to livelihood opportunities, access to services and civic and political participation

**Both returnee and host community women relied on unstable livelihoods**, such as small market businesses, but faced major challenges in generating income – particularly due to a lack of capital and increased competition at local markets. With the continued influx of returnees[3], these difficulties are likely to worsen, potentially fuelling tensions as markets become increasingly crowded. The deteriorating economic situation may further exacerbate these challenges.

**Female returnees appeared particularly vulnerable compared to female host community members**, often dependent on support from non-relatives and struggling to adapt to new livelihood opportunities. A lack of financial resources was cited as the primary barrier to accessing essential services, with returnees perceived as especially disadvantaged, having "returned with nothing."

As a result of this, **female returnees reported individuals are increasingly resorting to a variety of negative coping mechanisms,** such as early marriages, prostitution, or joining gangs, in order to access food or money to buy food. The fact that such coping strategies were never mentioned by female host community members, may very tentatively suggest such strategies could be more common among female returnees in the assessed areas.

**Neither returnee nor host community women were actively involved in community decision-making**. While some believed their voices would be heard if they participated, others cited gender, age, or returnee status as barriers. However, this assessment's findings showed no indications of large-scale exclusion of returnees from such decision-making progresses in Juba and Fashoda. Instead, **findings suggested that gender biases may be a more important exclusion factor from communal decision-making processes than displacement status**, aligning to the 2024 ISNA.

Taken together, while all women in the assessed areas faced significant challenges, **female returnees encountered disproportionate barriers**. Their heavy reliance on external support, lack of sustainable income, and limited access to services heightened their vulnerability. Without targeted interventions, these conditions risk trapping female returnees in a cycle of dependency, reinforcing protracted displacement and ongoing reliance on humanitarian aid. Protection services and livelihood support were deemed most important for returnees in both Juba and Fashoda.

## (c) In Juba and Fashoda, communal sharing/support mechanisms both depended on perceived quality of relationships between groups, as well as influenced the quality of these relationships

In Juba and Fashoda, **social mixing between female returnees and female host community members was widespread.** Participants from both groups reported equal participation of female host community members and female returnees in social life, with both groups reportedly interacting at a variety of occasions.

**The importance of communal sharing was evident** from primary data collected: sharing mechanisms are an integral part of household resilience – particularly in contexts of displacement, where households often rely more on support shared through their social network than they do on assistance from external aid actors.[4] **These sharing mechanisms are deeply rooted in social connections** between returnees and host communities.[5]

Indeed, **communal sharing mechanisms were often cited as examples of positive relationships between host communities and returnees**. In addition to the host community supporting returnees with food, shelter or money, some examples were also provided of two-way support mechanisms – particularly through non-material support such as sharing advice and emotional support. Previous assessments have found that such forms of non-material support, i.e. through emotional support, advice or counsel, were deemed to be of particular importance by women.

However, **obligatory sharing norms are not inherently positive or beneficial**. In some cases, households may feel forced to share scarce and much-needed resources, potentially contributing to household vulnerability. Indeed, female returnees recognized the difficulties for host communities in 'having to share' their resources with new arrivals, since host communities were reportedly already struggling to make ends meet. **This dynamic has the potential to fuel tensions**, with some frustration over returnees' reliance on host communities evident in both Juba and Fashoda at the time of data collection[i].

Despite these challenges, **overall social dynamics between returnees and host communities appeared positive**. Family reunification, the most commonly cited reason for settling in these areas, may have contributed to returnees feeling welcome. In Fashoda, most returnees reported strong ties to the land, culture, and local communities, further reinforcing positive relationships. These findings are crucial for understanding integration, as connections to the land significantly influence individuals' sense of belonging and inclusion within the community.[6]

### (d) Social integration was observed to be a dynamic concept that depends on a variety of factors and conditions and, as such, female returnees' perceptions of their own level of integration into the host community varied widely

**Female returnees identified resilience and self-reliance as the most important aspects of integration**. The positive social dynamics between returnees and host communities, as outlined in the findings, may explain why social acceptance was less frequently mentioned as a prerequisite for integration—suggesting that these conditions were largely met already at the time of data collection.[ii]

In contrast, resilience and self-reliance were perceived as critical yet unmet prerequisites for integration. This aligns with the assessment's findings on returnees' challenges in accessing livelihoods and essential services, as well as their continued dependence on host communities for support.

### (e) Nepotism and inadequate information on assistance delivery created barriers to humanitarian aid access in Juba and Fashoda

**Some inequalities in access to humanitarian assistance were reportedly present in Juba and Fashoda,** which participants **primarily linked to nepotism from community leaders**. Households that are better connected, particularly to local leaders and authorities, may thus be better able to access external aid and other resources in times of need, potentially at the expense of households who most need the assistance.[7] Despite findings from previous assessments suggesting that returnees may face disproportionate barriers to accessing aid[8], **findings did not indicate widespread exclusion of returnees from humanitarian assistance**. The fact that, particularly in Fashoda, a large majority of returnees reported reunification with their families and returning to areas they originally inhabited, may suggest that these returnees were equally connected to or disconnected from local leaders as the

[i] January – Febuary, 2025
[ii] January – February, 2025

relatives they reunite with were. However, returnees settling in areas where they lack personal connections may be more vulnerable to exclusion.

While the assessment's findings did not indicate access to humanitarian assistance was disproportionately difficult for returnees in Juba and Fashoda, it rather showed **low awareness of, and access to, humanitarian service delivery in both areas overall** – with both female returnees and female host community members reportedly lacking access to essential needs such as clean drinking water, healthcare and education.

For female returnees, who already encountered significant challenges in securing viable livelihood opportunities, the prolonged absence of humanitarian support led to **an increased reliance on social support networks** to meet basic needs. As previous studies have shown, such exceptional challenges in meeting basic needs whilst not having access to humanitarian support in settlement areas may increasingly compel new arrivals in transit areas to remain at humanitarian coordinated sites through the lean season.[9] Another risk factor associated with the overall feeling that assistance was insufficient to meet basic needs in specific areas, as previous work has shown[10], is displacement of both host communities and returnees alike. It may also potentially lead to tensions between the two groups, or even within the pre-existing host communities.

In addition to potential escalating tensions in response to a lack of access to humanitarian assistance whilst facing exceptional challenges in meeting basic needs for prolonged periods of time, findings also indicated that **opaque and disputed targeting practices of assistance may have caused tensions between groups**, as has been shown to happen in previous assessments as well.[11]

# CONTENTS

## List of Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **CSRF** | Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility |
| **DSAG** | Data Saturation and Analysis Grid |
| **DTM** | Displacement Tracking Matrix |
| **FGD** | Focus Group Discussion |
| **GBV** | Gender-Based Violence |
| **IASC** | Inter-Agency Standing Committee |
| **IDP** | Internally Displaced Persons |
| **II** | Individual Interview |
| **IOM** | International Organization for Migration |
| **IPC** | Integrated Food Security Phase Classification |
| **ISNA** | Inter-Sectoral Needs Assessment |
| **KII** | Key Informant Interview |
| **UN** | United Nations |
| **UNHCR** | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| **UNICEF** | United Nations Children's Fund |

## Geographical Classifications

| | |
|---|---|
| **State:** | Highest form of governance below the national level |
| **County**: | Highest form of governance below the State level, and first tier of local government.[12] |
| **Payam**: | The coordinating unit of a County which exercises delegated powers from the County.[13] |
| **Boma**: | Basic administrative unit which exercises de-concentrated powers within a County.[14] |
| **City/town**: | Urban area headed by a mayor.[15] |

## List of Figures, Tables and Maps



## Definitions

**Social Integration** is defined as "*the two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and host societies in which migrants are incorporated into the social, economic, cultural and political life of the receiving community*".[16] In other words, Social Integration refers to newcomers' ability to establish themselves in a new place and within a new community.[17] It is a multi-dimensional and multi-

directional social process, meaning it depends on diverse factors (e.g., access to resources, employment, and social interactions) and the involvement of various individuals (e.g. both returnees as well as the host community). As such, it incorporates other related notions such as Social Inclusion and Social Cohesion.

**Social Inclusion** is defined as *"the process by which efforts are made to ensure equal opportunities – that everyone, regardless of their background, can achieve their full potential in life. Such efforts include policies and actions that promote equal access to (public) services as well as enable citizens' participation in the decision-making processes that affect their lives"*.[18] In a humanitarian context, the most immediate needs of communities to achieve Social Inclusion are thus economic inclusion, equal access to basic services and civic and political participation.[19]

**Social Cohesion** refers to *"the quality of relationships between different groups of people, and between those groups and the institutions that govern them"*.[20] Thus, Social Cohesion is achieved both "horizontally" (i.e. through inter- and intra-group relationships) as well as "vertically" (i.e. through relationships between local populations with the state, humanitarian actors and local institutions). As such, Social Cohesion is mostly geared towards longer-term processes and dynamics – i.e. positive social relations, a sense of identification or belonging, and an orientation towards the common good.[21]

**Displacement-affected populations** refers to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), refugees, returnees and the host community in the areas in which IDPs and/or returnees are present.

- According to UNHCR guidelines, a **returnee** is defined as *'a refugee or internally displaced person who has returned to their country or area of origin to remain there permanently'*.[22] For the purpose of this assessment, which focuses on returnees from Sudan, the term returnee is used for all displaced individuals with the South Sudanese nationality who have crossed the border from Sudan into South Sudan since April 2023.
- **Host communities** are the local communities in which displaced persons (IDP, returnee, refugee) reside. For the purpose of this assessment, host communities refer to people residing in the area before the Sudan conflict began in April 2023.

**Durable Solutions** are considered by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to be achieved when "displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement".[23] The IASC recognises three kinds of durable solutions: sustainable return to the area of origin; sustainable local integration; and sustainable integration into another area.[24]

**Area of settlement** refers to the area in which considerable proportions of returnees, in this case from Sudan, settle for the medium to long term. In other words, this excludes places that are primarily 'transit locations' (such as Renk) – as these are locations where returnees mostly transit only, and thus usually do not have the intention to integrate with the host community and/or do not interact with the host community as much.

**Area of origin** refers to the geographic region from which individuals or populations migrated. In some cases, this may refer to where one's parents or grandparents were from (i.e. their ancestral home), rather than the location from which one was most recently displaced.[25] Determining someone's area of origin can be difficult in contexts like South Sudan, in which displacement and migration has happened multiple times and across generations. For example, someone who grew up in Eastern Equatoria but whose parents and grandparents were from Upper Nile might see Upper Nile as their area of origin, despite never having been there themselves. For the purpose of this assessment, therefore, we will primarily make use of the term 'Area of settlement' – since returnees from Sudan are free to choose which area to settle in; be it their Area of Origin, or alternative locations.'

**Gender-Based Violence (GBV)** is a life-threatening health and protection issue, which can include sexual, physical, mental and economic harm inflicted in public or in private.[26] While it is acknowledged that men and boys are subject to gender-based violence[iii], this assessment focuses on violence against women and girls, who are disproportionally affected by GBV.[iv] The risk of GBV against women and girls further increases in times of crisis.[27]

**Violence against women** is defined by the United Nations as "*any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life*".[28] While, globally, most of this violence against women is intimate partner violence (i.e. behaviour by an intimate partner or sexual partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm), this assessment mainly focuses on non-partner sexual violence, experienced by women and girls returning from Sudan.

**Sexual violence** is "*any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It includes rape, defined as the physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of the vulva or anus with a penis, other body part or object, attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching and other non-contact forms*".[29]

[iii] Especially in the presence of multiple or overlapping vulnerabilities (to name a few: age, disability, nationality, belonging to marginalized groups, sexual orientation, and gender identity)

[iv] Furthermore, investigating access of men and boys GBV survivors was deemed a too sensitive topic for research in the context of Sudan and South Sudan due to the risks connected to investigating this specific population group for all parties involved in the assessment.

# INTRODUCTION

**The outbreak of conflict in Sudan in April 2023 and continued unrest throughout 2024 have exacerbated the humanitarian situation in South Sudan**. As of February 2025, over 1 million individuals have been displaced from Sudan to South Sudan – 69 percent of whom are South Sudanese nationals, or "returnees".[30]

**These returnees endure arduous journeys, conflict-related trauma, and arrive in South Sudan with minimal financial or social resources**.[31] Stories of severe suffering and human rights violations are widespread. According to a senior official at UNHCR: *"I spoke to people who watched while their families were murdered. People are targeted on the basis of their ethnicity. Men and boys are killed and their bodies are burned. Women raped while fleeing. People told me over and over again how they remember the bodies they saw abandoned by the road as they were fleeing."*.[32]

**Women and girls, who constitute the majority of recently displaced persons, face severe security and protection risks.**[v] Sexual violence is frequently used as a weapon of war, with forcibly displaced women and children at heightened risk of rape, trafficking, and forced prostitution. [33] In July 2023, senior United Nations (UN) officials raised alarms over increasing reports of gender-based violence against women fleeing Sudan.[34]

**Returnee women are highly vulnerable and require substantial support across different sectors to meet their basic needs – including protection services**.[35] Most do not own land or cattle and have depleted their financial assets – either spending them on the journey back or losing them to robbery.[36] Indeed, according to the latest Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) analysis - conducted in October 2024 - returnees from Sudan made up 75 percent of households in IPC Phase-5 (Catastrophe) between September and November 2024, despite comprising just 5 percent of the total population. In the first half of 2025, the IPC estimated that 31,000 returnees would continue to experience catastrophic hunger.[37]

**Large-scale displacement from Sudan has put pressure on governmental, humanitarian and development actors in South Sudan to provide shelter and basic services**.[38] To decongest border and transit areas, onward transportation of returnees is a key priority in both the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan and the Government of South Sudan's action plan for durable solutions.[39] However, many returnees settle in "areas of origin" that already face severe service deficits, straining host communities who are forced to share limited resources.[40] Meanwhile, returnees often rely on humanitarian aid, especially those without family or communal support networks.

**Despite the needs-based approach to humanitarian service delivery, gaps remain in returnees' access to aid.** The current assistance model – focusing on cash or food assistance at the point of entering the country and transportation support - may exclude returnees who disperse into host communities and are only registered when concentrated in large numbers or experiencing extreme food insecurity.[41] Furthermore, even though selection approaches for humanitarian aid in South Sudan are needs-based, recent work has shown that they too often exclude particular groups of people from assistance and that returnees commonly feel marginalised by traditional authorities in the distribution of aid.[42] This may suggest a broader pattern of social exclusion and vulnerability for returnees, exacerbating potential for conflicts in several areas.[43]

[v] While it is acknowledged that men and boys are subject to gender-based violence, especially in the presence of multiple or overlapping vulnerabilities (e.g. age, disability, nationality, sexual orientation, and gender identity), investigating access of men and boys GBV survivors was deemed a too sensitive topic for research, due to the risks connected to investigating this specific population group for all parties involved in the assessment.

## Information gaps & intended impact

**There is a lack of qualitative research into the return and settlement experiences of female returnees from Sudan**. Limited information exists on the extent to which returnees, particularly women, integrate into host communities upon arrival. Thus, a deeper understanding of different aspects of Social Integration[vi] in areas of settlement is needed. Examining female returnees' integration can help reveal whether they receive adequate support to address key unmet needs, including those related to gender-based violence (GBV). Additionally, it is essential to assess the availability, accessibility, and appropriateness of these services to mitigate harm and prevent further injury to survivors/victims.[44]

**Addressing these information gaps can support humanitarian, development and governmental partners in designing community-centred, accountable programs that promote Social Integration and respond effectively to female returnees' needs.** Taking a people-centred approach by directly engaging female returnees contributes to accountability of the humanitarian response to all affected populations, including this vulnerable, yet under-assessed, group.

**This assessment provides insights into women's return experiences from Sudan, their needs—especially regarding GBV—and their integration into host communities upon settlement**. Engaging both female returnees and female host community members helps ensure durable solutions align with the rights, needs, and preferences of both groups – making sure host communities can absorb displaced persons, that displaced persons are able to choose between options, and that all South Sudanese are resilient to future shocks.[45]

## Research objectives

**The overall aim of this assessment is to provide a qualitative deep-dive** into female returnees' experiences with their displacement from Sudan, and female returnees' and female host community members' experiences with the integration of returnees into communities in areas of settlement in South Sudan.[vii] The assessment consists of two distinct but interrelated components, each contributing to different deliverables. As such, the assessment has two main objectives:

1. To explore female returnees' and female host community members' **perspectives on the Social Integration** of female returnees into areas of settlement, by assessing markers of Social Inclusion and Social Cohesion[viii]

2. To map **GBV response service delivery** in areas of settlement, focusing on the availability, accessibility, and acceptability of these services, particularly for female returnees.

A list of research questions was developed to help address both research objectives (see Annex A). This report presents the findings related to the first research objective of the assessment. All findings related to objective 2 are presented in a separate brief.[ix]

[vi] This includes assessing specific markers of Social Inclusion - i.e. economic inclusion, equal access to services, civic and political participation, and how all of these differ between groups – as well as Social Cohesion dynamics, i.e. social mixing and relationships between different groups. For a more detailed description of these concepts, please see the list of key definitions on page 7.

[vii] See List of Key Definitions below for an explanation on the term "Area of settlement"

[viii] See section 3.1 below on a more detailed explanation of the markers assessed

[ix] Available upon request from REACH

# METHODOLOGY

**Primary data collection followed a qualitative approach**, recognizing the engagement of affected communities in crisis, particularly women and girls, is a key aspect of an effective humanitarian response. Individual interviews (IIs) were conducted with female returnees from Sudan, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with both female returnees and female host community members. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with experts on GBV service delivery in the Juba and Fashoda. The primary data collected was supported by a secondary data review, used to triangulate the findings and better situate the findings in the broader scope of the humanitarian response in South Sudan.

## Geographical scope

**Three locations - Juba, Aweil East and Fashoda counties - were purposively selected for data collection**, based on: estimated number of returnees[46], region[x], protection service reach[xi] and logistical considerations[xii]. As a result of continued tensions in Aweil East in January 2025, staff and community safety were prioritized, leading to the suspension of all data collection activities in the county.


**Map 1: Map of assessed locations.**

[x] the county's geographic location is important, as different migration routes (e.g., from Khartoum to Joda or from Darfur to Northern Bahr el Ghazal) may shape the experiences, challenges, and services required by returnees.

[xi] to be able to assess the accessibility, relevance, and quality of GBV services delivered, counties where there is already a baseline level of protection service delivery, even if not related to GBV, were selected.

[xii] data collection occurred in areas where security conditions allow for safe and ethical in-person engagement. Additionally, the presence of local partners ensures the safety of both the research team and participants and provides pathways for referrals in cases of GBV

## Data collection methods & sampling strategy

**Qualitative data were collected from January 28 to February 19, 2025.** All participants were selected using non-probability sampling. FGD and II participants were identified through community engagement and mobilization processes, aiming to include a diverse range of perspectives. KII participants were identified through snowball sampling. Given the qualitative approach and purposive sampling strategy, findings are indicative of the situation at the time of data collection and are not statistically representative. To mitigate the reduction in sample size, following the removal of Aweil East as location of data collection, additional interviews were conducted in Juba and Fashoda. The final sample size is summarized in table 1.

**Table 1. Targeted and final sample sizes for the different data collection methods**

| Method | Population | Target Sample Size | Final Sample Size Achieved |
|---|---|---|---|
| **FGDs** | Female returnees, female host community members | **15 FGDs**<br>• Juba: 5 FGDs<br>• Fashoda: 5 FGDs<br>• Aweil East: 5 FGDs | **11 FGDs**<br>• Juba: 5 FGDs<br>  ○ 3 FGDs with returnees<br>  ○ 2 FGDs with host community<br>• Fashoda: 6 FGDs<br>  ○ 4 FGDs with returnees<br>  ○ 2 FGDs with host community |
| **IIs** | Female returnees | **30 IIs**<br>• Juba: 10 IIs<br>• Fashoda: 10 IIs<br>• Aweil East: 10 IIs | **30 IIs**<br>• Juba: 12 IIs<br>• Fashoda: 18 IIs |
| **KIIs** | Service providers / implementing partners of GBV services | **9 KIIs**<br>• Juba: 3 KIIs<br>• Fashoda: 3 KIIs<br>• Aweil East: 3 KIIs | **15 KIIs**<br>• Juba: 8 KIIs<br>• Fashoda: 7 KIIs |

**A total of 11 FGDs were conducted, involving 45 participants.** The FGDs sought to explore perspectives on aspects of Social Integration of female returnees within the host community. Therefore, the data collected in the FGDs will be primarily be used to address research objective 1.[xiii] Separate group discussions were conducted with female returnees and with female host community members.[xiv] Participants were asked to answer questions on conditions and trends in the broader area assessed. FGDs were conducted in the local language, with translation provided either by a Field Officer of the research team or by a locally hired translator. Notes were taken during the discussions and later validated by the moderator or Field Officer.

**A total of 30 IIs were conducted.** The IIs sought to explore similar topics as the FGDs, focusing on individual experiences of female returnees with displacement and social integration. Data collected in the IIs will thus be used primarily in the analysis and writing process for research objective 1.[xv] IIs were conducted in the local language, with translation provided either by a Field Officer of the research

[xiii] Nevertheless, data collected in the FGD that is related to GBV/protection may also be used in the analysis process of research objective 2 – and, as such, may be referenced in the brief developed from those analyses.

[xiv] See page 11 for the definitions of 'host community' and 'returnees'.

[xv] Again, any data collected in the IIs that is related to GBV/protection may also be used in the analysis process of research objective 2 – and, as such, may be referenced in the brief developed from those analyses.

team or by a locally hired translator. Notes were taken during the discussions and later validated by the moderator or Field Officer.

**A total of 15 KIIs were conducted**. As the main source of data feeding into addressing the second research objective[xvi], the KIIs sought to explore current GBV response service delivery, challenges faced by service providers, and potential gaps in service delivery. Interviews were conducted with individuals with expertise on and experience in the protection/GBV sector in the respective areas.

## Analysis

**Qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis using Data Saturation and Analysis Grids (DSAGs),** which allowed for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns within the data. The DSAGs comprised three "layers" of analysis: Discussion Topics, Discussion Sub-Topics, and Data Points. Discussion Topics were based on questions from the qualitative tools, while Discussion Sub-Topics and Discussion Points were created inductively, based on themes emerging from the transcripts. The DSAGs guided the development of a narrative analysis of primary data, allowing for a comprehensive, triangulated interpretation of the findings

## Challenges and Limitations

- **Insecurity and sampling adjustments**: as mentioned above, rising tensions and security incidents in South Sudan in late January 2025 led to a temporary pause in data collection, resulting in the removal of Aweil East from the sample. To compensate, data collection was expanded in Juba and Fashoda. While the final overall sample size remained close to the initial plan, the exclusion of Aweil East reduced analytical depth.
- **Adjustments to sample:** following the removal of Aweil East, additional KIIs were conducted in Juba and Fashoda. However, the limited presence of GBV and protection service providers in Fashoda restricted the feasibility of interviewing only GBV service providers. As a result, in addition to interviewing representatives from all four GBV-implementing partners in Fashoda, the team conducted interviews with two women leaders/representatives and one national non-governmental organisation staff member specializing in migration and cross-border monitoring. This approach ensured the collection of robust data on GBV/protection service delivery while also incorporating expert insights on broader research themes.
- **Translation/transcription**: Since interviews were not audio-recorded, the transcripts were detailed notes. The research teams made efforts to include as much detail as possible in each transcript. Additionally, as some interviews were translated from the local language to English during the discussions, there is a possibility that some details may have been lost in translation, or responses may have been abbreviated by the translator. To mitigate this, Field Officers who moderated the discussions carefully reviewed each transcript for translation errors or missing data, correcting these where possible.

# FINDINGS

## Pathways of return and challenges encountered in different phases of the return process.

This sub-section outlines assessment findings related to female returnees' journeys from their home in Sudan to their area of settlement in South Sudan, i.e. Juba or Fashoda. It describes which routes are taken most commonly and why, whether female returnees used transportation assistance and what other types of assistance they received and where. The sub-section also outlines the most common challenges that female returnees reported to have faced during their return process.

### (a) Pathways of return were based on continuous risk mitigating decisions and were often a sum of several movements.

**Almost all interviewed returnees entered South Sudan through Wunthow (Juda) Point of Entry**, the most heavily trafficked border point in South Sudan's Upper Nile State.[47] Most participants reportedly reached Wunthow by vehicle, primarily public transportation which most paid a fee for.[xvii] Some participants, however, mentioned traveling by foot in Sudan, sometimes for days.

**Upon arrival in South Sudan, travel by boat was the most commonly reported type of transportation departing Renk**[xviii], reported by the large majority of female returnees in both locations. Returnees in Fashoda reported having exited the boat in Kodok, the capital of Fashoda county, while returnees in Juba reported having taken the same boat further until Malakal. From Malakal, the majority of returnees reported having used humanitarian-facilitated[xix] **air travel** to Juba.

**Several female returnees in Fashoda reported having stayed in one of the White Nile refugee camps[xx] in Sudan** for a while first, before crossing the border into South Sudan. These women reported having fled Khartoum, or other areas in Sudan, when the fighting started in April 2023 – moving to one of the camps in Sudan near the border with South Sudan. A few of these women reported the insecurity situation in these camps worsened by the end of 2024, leading to them deciding to move again and cross the border to South Sudan.

> *"We had to leave. They put these people to secure them [camp residents], but instead of taking care of the people in the camp, they came to rape some people and they tore some houses down." – II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

Similarly, **some participants spoke about continued displacement in South Sudan** – i.e. them settling in a certain location in South Sudan for a while, before feeling they had to move onwards because of challenging living conditions.

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[xvii] Participants reported having paid different amounts of transportation fees, ranging from 1.000 Sudanese Pounds to 150.000 Sudanese Pounds (at the time of data collection, roughly 1.66 USD – 250 USD). Distance traveled and mode of transportation (e.g. bus versus small vehicle) all influence the price of the journey per person. Most participants, however, noted being unsure of the exact transportation fees paid per person. Furthermore, the reported prices do not factor in fees paid at checkpoints,

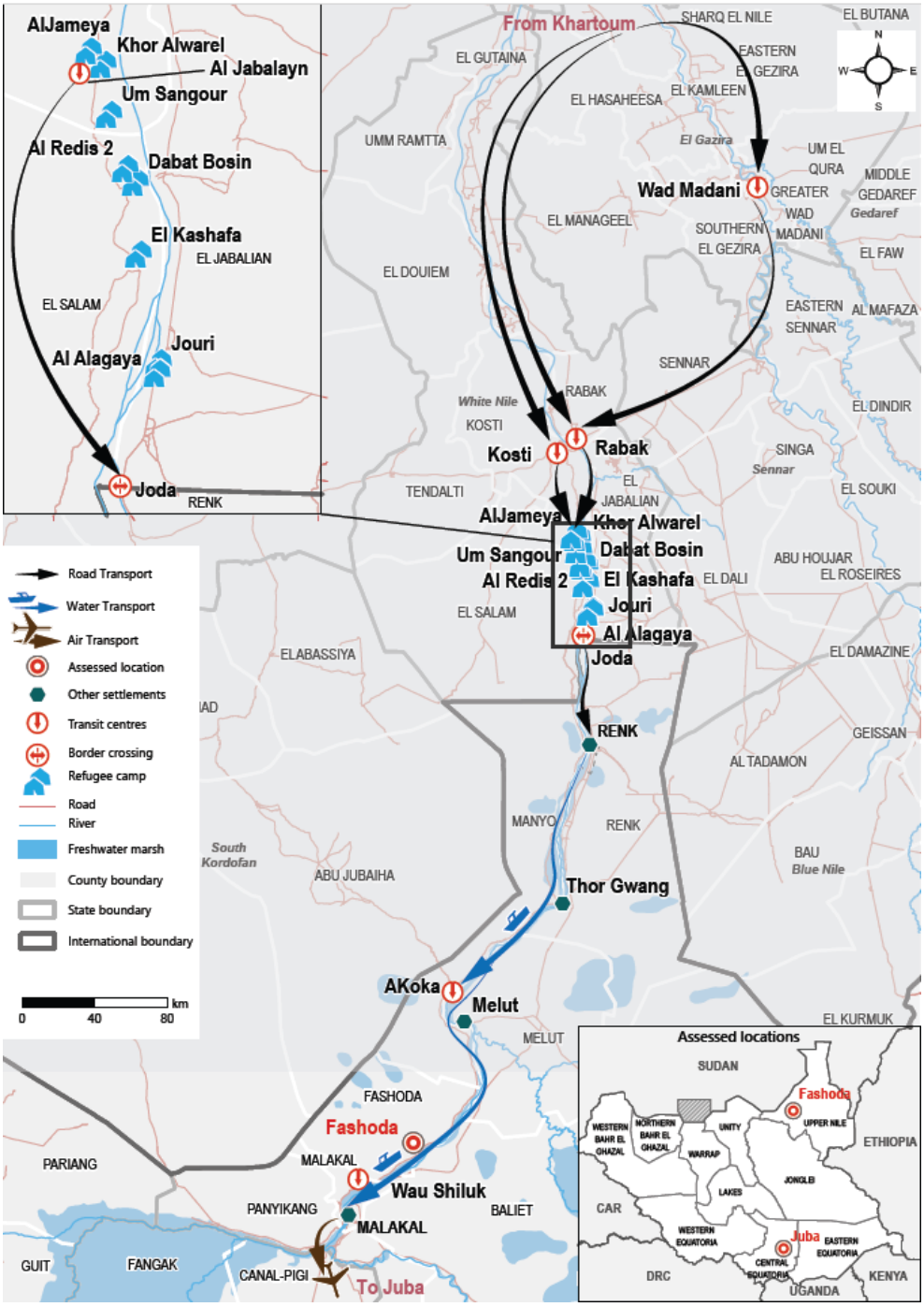
[xviii] In the interviews, participants mostly spoke about their journey from Sudan to Joda, and from Renk to other locations. The Joda-Renk segment of the journey was rarely mentioned when participants were asked about the means of transportation. According to a previous assessment on Sudan-South Sudan cross-border displacement[34], travel by road was reported to be the main type of travel between Joda and Renk. In the current assessment, the Joda-Renk segment was commonly reported when participants were asked about humanitarian-facilitated movement (see section b) below).

[xix] Please see section b) for more information on the use of transportation assistance

[xx] Sudan's White Nile state houses over 400,000 displaced persons, the majority of whom South Sudanese, dispersed over several camps.

*"Yes, we intended to come and settle in Renk. But when we [the interviewee and her siblings] came to Renk, the economic situation in Renk was hard so we decided to proceed to Kodok. But Kodok became worse, and we decided to come further to here." – II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

Indeed, as described in a recent assessment on displacement in South Sudan[48], the country *'is experiencing movements that are labelled as 'return' but that are, in fact, pendular (back and forth), partial (household splitting across borders) and transitory, which people rely on to minimise risks, as well as to access rights and opportunities for protection.*' As such, **many displaced individuals faced multiple experiences of displacement, return, and renewed displacement**.




**Map 2 Routes from Sudan to South Sudan**

### (b) Transportation assistance was commonly used and considered to be an essential enabler to movement

**The use of transportation assistance was commonly reported** – particularly support provided by organizations to relocate from Joda to Renk, and from Renk to Kodok or Malakal. While the 2024 Inter-Sectoral Needs Assessment (ISNA)[49] found that the use of transportation assistance was considerably more commonly reported by returnees in Fashoda (96 percent) compared to returnees in Juba (30 percent), this assessment's findings did not indicate major differences in the use of transportation assistance between returnees from both locations – as participants in Juba commonly reported having received support to relocate. In addition to transportation assistance between Joda and Malakal, participants in Juba mentioned having used transportation assistance from Malakal to Juba. Several participants emphasized that **without onward transportation assistance they would not have been able to reach their intended destination**.

> *"The transport means that were provided from Joda South to Renk, and from Renk to Malakal, as well as to Juba, these were the reasons why I met my family and relatives, so I did appreciate that. If it was not for humanitarians, I would have stayed in Renk or somewhere I do not know." – II with a female returnee, Juba*

Only two participants noted they had to **use their own means of transportation since there was no transportation assistance available**. While one reported not being aware of any organization in Malakal offering transportation assistance, the other was reportedly told in Malakal there was no assistance available for relocation.

**Most participants mentioned practical or logistically related reasons for taking specific routes from Sudan to their intended destinations**: i.e. the route being the 'easiest' or the 'fastest' one. Considering the reliance of participants on onward transportation assistance, the availability of such assistance was likely one of the key contributors to which route was taken. For only a few participants, the perception that other types of humanitarian assistance (i.e. aside from transportation assistance) was provided on the way was a factor that played into their decision to choose a specific route to their area of settlement.

### (c) Other forms of humanitarian assistance were commonly accessed on the way, although the quantity of support was insufficient to meet returnees' essential needs

**In addition to onward transportation assistance, participants reportedly accessed other forms of humanitarian assistance on the way**. Participants most often mentioned having received biscuits or money, mostly in Renk or, to a lesser extent, in Juda. Only a few participants reported having received assistance in Malakal, or upon arrival in their final area of settlement.

Some participants expressed a preference for a different form of aid, such as cash instead of in-kind assistance or vice versa. However, several acknowledged that **the aid they received aligned with their primary needs**. Still, they emphasized **the aid was insufficient to cover all their essential needs**. Furthermore, while one participant observed people "fighting over" assistance in Renk and another noted not receiving aid there while others did, several participants perceived that **aid distribution along the route was fair and equitable**.

> *"There is an area [in Renk] where they distribute aid. People will be standing in a line. The humanitarian workers provide orders whereby each and every one has to abide. So there was no fighting over the assistance." – II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

### (d) On the move in Sudan, female returnees encountered a wide array of severe and, in some cases, life-threatening challenges

These challenges can be broadly categorized into four categories: insecurity challenges, lack of access to basic services, challenges related to GBV, and a lack of freedom of movement.

First, **challenges related to insecurity were widely reported by female returnees in both Juba and Fashoda.** Many participants mentioned being robbed of money and other possessions on the way, and beatings by police forces were commonly reported as well. Participants also spoke about men and boys not being allowed to leave Sudan. They reported stories of men and boys being detained by police or armed groups, forcibly recruited into armed groups or – when they refused – being killed.

> "*They [police/armed groups] are checking people. If you come with new things like clothes, they take it. They say you have to return as you came; when you ran from South Sudan to Sudan you did not come with anything. So they are saying you should not take anything back from Khartoum.*" – *II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

Second, **challenges related to access to basic services on the way were widespread**. Almost all participants spoke about hunger as a result of a lack of access to food on the way, and some reported having no access to clean drinking water – leading to some of them opting to drink contaminated water directly from the river. Many participants reported protection concerns, mostly related to having to sleep outside or on the road at night, and sickness was reportedly widespread, with participants commonly reporting having no access to healthcare while traveling at all.

> *"Sometimes when we were coming, there were days when we did not even eat. We ate any remaining food from the garbage, we just eat only those foods" – II with a female returnee, Juba*

Third, **some participants specifically mentioned GBV-related concerns** – including rape and sexual abuse on the way.[xxi]

> *"They are killing people in front of us. We are watching them while they are killing. Even someone, you are seeing her and they just take her. They are killing men and they are taking women as their wives." – II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

### (e) A lack of financial resources and limited decision-making power of women were the main barriers to movement

In addition to the above challenges, several participants also reported issues related to freedom of movement. While some reported issues related to documentation, i.e. being detained for not having all required travel documents, most participants considered **a lack of financial resources to be the key determinant for freedom of movement**. Participants reported having to pay "passing fees" at checkpoints, having to pay for armed escorts, or having to pay for transport. As such, participants considered those with access to financial resources, either their own or through support from relatives or friends, to be able to move around more freely.

> *"From Khartoum to Renk, we were escorted by soldiers. So whenever we passed a small distance, we would find soldiers there that we would give money. We just kept giving out money until we reached up to Renk. By the time we reached Renk, we had no more money." – II with a female returnee, Juba.*

As such**, those in Sudan without access to financial resources, or access to financial support from relatives or friends, are likely to face additional barriers to move to South Sudan** (or any other

[xxi] As explained above, findings related to GBV will be discussed more in-depth in a separate brief which will be published as a stand-alone deliverable in addition to the current report. The brief is available from REACH upon request.

country). In other words, there might be a potentially considerable population – both South Sudanese and Sudanese individuals - in Sudan currently lacking the financial resources enabling their onwards movement. One previous assessment did find that recent arrivals in South Sudan had observed large groups of people unable to displace along their journey, presumably because they ran out of financial resources.[50] Indeed, the same study found that access to cash was the most critical determinant of onward movement capacity and, as a result, insufficient access to cash was described as a key driver of household separation.

This may also mean that, in the long-term, **the displaced populations crossing the border from Sudan to South Sudan will be increasingly vulnerable** – as this group of new arrivals may include a disproportionate number of people without assets or financial resources, who thus may be increasingly dependent on humanitarian assistance to meet their immediate needs and for onward transportation to their areas of settlement. This aligns to trends observed in previous data collection efforts[51], which suggest that the initial wave of arrivals from Sudan (i.e. those arriving in the first months after the conflict erupted in April 2023) were 'better off' compared to those who followed.

In addition to a lack of financial resources preventing movement or relocation, some female returnees reported movement decisions to be made by their husbands or male family members. In both Juba and Fashoda, several female returnees echoed the sentiment that, as a woman, they had no advocacy over such decisions, signalling **a lack of decision-making power of women over displacement decisions**.

> *"I don't want this place because I don't like it. Life here is very hard. If it is me, I would not stay here. But because I'm under someone's responsibility I have to stay here if I want or not. I have to do what my husband decides." – II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

An assessment into return and reintegration in South Sudan in 2023 also found that decisions about the when and where of a move are often made by men, or by the extended family and community networks.[52] Already, the current and previous work[53] have shown that families are sometimes compelled to split in search of safety and resources – in some cases leading to women returning to South Sudan without their husband or any close male family members. **Not having the advocacy to decide whether to go or to stay, these female returnees may be more adversely affected by the current economic challenges**, leading to a worsened financial situation.

In addition to a lack of decision-making power of women over decisions whether to stay or relocate, one previous assessment also found that, reportedly, women were more likely to prefer to 'stay in their current location and adapt to the existing possibilities in terms of alternative livelihoods and coping mechanisms that were already applied by the host community for subsistence, rather than engaging in long and arduous movements to onwards destinations.'[54] This may in part be due to the heightened protection risks for women in transit, which has been widely reported by displaced women in both Sudan and South Sudan.[55]

### (f) While journeys in South Sudan were considered less arduous compared to in Sudan, female returnees encountered several challenges en route in South Sudan as well

While participants commonly noted **an alleviation of most of the reported insecurity-related challenges once they crossed the border with South Sudan, other challenges reportedly persisted** – primarily a lack of food, and a lack of access to healthcare. Additionally, some insecurity-related challenges unique to the South Sudan context were reported as well. For instance, participants commonly spoke about the challenging conditions on the boats from Renk to Kodok/Malakal. They noted a lack of food, a lack of sanitation facilities, and over-crowded situations on the boat.

Participants described several instances of violence and/or fighting on the boats, which reportedly mostly happened between different ethnic groups.

> *"The situation of the boat is very, very bad. Because there are many many people there. So if you tell your neighbour to squeeze; they will say there is no place. They can just step on your baby, and then they just begin to fight. There are very many tribes on the boat [...] they fight a lot between them." – II with a female returnee, Fashoda.*

In a previous study[56], interview participants widely reported that difficult conditions on boat journeys between Renk and Malakal resulted in them opting out of boat transportation and travel by road instead. In the current assessment, **although challenging conditions on these boat journeys were reported by female returnees, none had reportedly used or considered alternative modes of transportation** from Renk to other locations.

**Participants also reportedly encountered insecurity-related challenges during transit in Renk**. Being forced to sleep in the open reportedly resulted in returnees' last remaining properties being looted. Indeed, in a recent Voices on the Move bulletin, 20 percent of the feedback received in Renk was related to widespread insecurity and violence concerns, including thefts and physical abuse.[57]

### (g) Overall, findings suggested female returnees' return processes were traumatizing experiences

Apart from the above mentioned challenges, which in itself were considered traumatizing by participants, several participants mentioned having seen people being killed in front of their eyes, to have seen dead people on the roadside, or to have lost their own children on the way. Others mentioned they had to leave family members behind and that they have not been able to get in touch with them since, thus not knowing what has happened to them.

> *"On the way from Sudan, we were looted and some of our family members were detained at the checkpoints by militia. They do not allow men or boys to go to South Sudan. Up to now, we do not know whether they are alive or dead" – II with a female returnee, Juba.*

This aligns to findings from recent studies, which have found similar **reports of returnees experiencing gross violations** en route to South Sudan, including abuse, sexual violence, looting, family separation, killings, torture.[58] In Renk, reports on violence, harassment, exhaustion, sickness, hunger, and trauma among new arrivals from Sudan are common.[59] Women and girls are reporting to have been exposed to extreme violence, signalling an immediate need for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support.[60]

## How various push and pull factors contributed to female returnees' decisions to settle in Juba or Fashoda, or to relocate from those locations

This sub-section outlines assessment findings related to female returnees' choices regarding their area of settlement, including push and pull factors.

### (a) Most female returnees were residing in their intended area of settlement, with family reunification noted as the most important pull factor to these areas

**The large majority of participants in both Juba and Fashoda reported currently residing in their intended area of settlement**. This aligns to findings from the 2024 ISNA which found that the majority of returnees in both Fashoda and Juba (83 percent and 59 percent, respectively) reported having settled in the location they intended to move to.[61]

**Family reunification was the most common reason to settle in the respective location**, reported by a majority of participants in Juba as well as Fashoda. In some cases, participants specifically mentioned that their relatives offered them a place to stay, or could help them find a job. Other participants linked family reunification to a sense of comfort, being happy to get in touch with them again after having lived in Sudan.

Some participants specifically reported returning to their area of origin, and some mentioned the importance of being from the same tribe as the host community. Even more, **in Fashoda, returnees often used terms related to their ancestral homeland** such as "home", "my country" and "our land" to describe the area they settled in – suggesting these returnees still have strong ties with their chosen areas of settlement, despite the time they spent living in Sudan.

> *"I have chosen this place because it is my place. When I was in Sudan, I think this was my real place where I was staying before. So I have to come back here" – II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

This aligns to findings from previous assessments, which found that **identifying the area of settlement as one's original or ancestral land was one of the main pull factors for returnees' decision on settling down in these areas** – also for returnees who had spent the entirety or majority of their lives residing in Sudan.[62] While such strong links to returnees' ancestral homeland were not mentioned in any of the conversations with returnees residing in Juba, some participants in Juba did report having come to the area since they had lived there before.

> *"I chose Juba because I stayed here before. So it is easier to return, because I know this place better compared to other places in South Sudan" – II with a female returnee, Juba*

**Livelihood-related reasons, while less often reported, were also mentioned by some participants as a pull factor weighing in their decision to stay in their current area** – reported mainly by participants in Juba. These included: access to markets for livelihood sources, access to education, and security, and were attributed to Juba being a large urban centre. On the other hand, some participants in Fashoda reported pull factors which led them to opt for staying in villages instead of the town (i.e. Kodok). According to these participants, resources are more easily accessible in villages – e.g. they can more easily get wood from the forests to build shelters, or fish from the rivers to eat or sell.

> *"I told my mom I wanted to come to this village, because here you can go to the forest and collect wood and take it to Kodok and sell it for money." – Female Returnee, Fashoda*

With family reunification being the main pull factor reported by returnees in both locations, the question arises how resettlement decisions are made by **returnees who may not have relatives in South Sudan anymore or whose relatives may live in harder to reach areas** – since both Fashoda and Juba may be relatively easy to reach compared to other locations in South Sudan. Indeed, a recent study found that return is not an aspiration for many displaced persons: a considerable proportion of young South Sudanese was born in displacement and does not have direct experiences living in their families' areas of origin. As such, many do not aspire to return to their ancestral homeland and may opt to move to urban areas that are unfamiliar to them, which could lead to renewed patterns of displacement.[63]

### (b) Despite reported challenges in areas of settlement, only a few returnees expressed the intention to move further – mainly to locations in South Sudan

Despite reporting a wide variety of challenges[xxii] in Juba and Fashoda, which previous assessments have shown to be important push factors for returnees in deciding to leave the current area[64], **only a**

[xxii] i.e. a lack of food, perceived hunger, a lack of livelihood opportunities, and mental struggles. These will be discussed more in detail in further sections.

**few participants mentioned they had the intention of moving further** to other locations. This was slightly more common among participants from Juba compared to Fashoda.

A desire to move back to Sudan, commonly reported in a previous assessment on returnee integration in South Sudan[65], was rarely reported in the current assessment.[xxiii] Instead, **those wanting to move further reported they intended to relocate to other locations in South Sudan**. Reasons given for this aligned to the aforementioned pull factors, i.e. reuniting with relatives or perceived better living conditions.

An assessment on social cohesion conducted in Renk in 2023 also found that **perceived insecurity in the area of origin dissuaded some returnees from leaving** Renk.[66] Having left their homes in South Sudan during the South Sudan crisis, these returnees expressed uncertainties on whether it would be safe for them to return back to their areas of origin. Similarly, a considerable proportion of participants in Fashoda reported having left the area for Sudan as a result of local conflict a few years back. At the time of data collection[xxiv], however, these returnees reportedly considered the situation in Fashoda to be safe and stable, particularly considering the security situation in Sudan.

Taken together, this underlines findings from previous assessments showing that **returnees are balancing several risks and considerations in determining whether to stay or relocate**, including considerations of peace and security, access to services, economic and family considerations and quality of life.[67] Again, a lack of financial resources and limited decision-making power over movement decisions were most commonly reported by female returnees as barriers to their potential relocation.

## Perspectives on Social Inclusion of female returnees in Juba and Fashoda

This sub-section outlines assessment findings related to perspectives on the social inclusion of female returnees into host communities in Juba and Fashoda. Social inclusion is broadly categorized into three different themes, each of which will be discussed here separately: access to livelihoods; access to basic services, and; civic and political participation.

### (a) Female returnees and female host community members heavily relied on unstable income sources, with support from relatives particularly important among female returnees

**In both Juba and Fashoda, participants from both population groups[xxv] mostly reported running a small business as their main livelihood source.** In Fashoda, this was mainly selling of firewood, fish or local wine/alcohol. In Juba, participants from both population groups reported a variety of businesses, such as selling food items (e.g. groundnuts, ice-cream, mendazi), charcoal or perfume.

While agriculture traditionally is an important livelihood source in Fashoda, reported by 94 percent of host community households and 78 percent of returnee households in the 2024 ISNA[68], **cultivation was rarely reported by participants from both population groups**. The few who did, mainly female host community members, reported already having run out of stocks from the last harvest period.

> *"Some [women] are cultivating. But the rain stopped and the crops that they cultivated, they already ate them" – FGD with female host community members, Fashoda.*

[xxiii] And also not in the assessment conducted in Renk (REACH, 2023b)

[xxiv] January – February, 2025

[xxv] "both population groups" refers to both female returnees and female host community members, here and everywhere else in the report.

This aligns to findings from recent assessments conducted in Upper Nile State. One assessment, conducted in Malakal at the end of 2024, found that severe flooding had resulted in almost completely failed harvest in 2024 – leading to food stocks to exhaust in October, approximately four months earlier than usual.[69] Indeed, another assessment showed that access to traditional livelihoods in Malakal, such as livestock rearing and crop cultivation, reportedly decreased over recent years due to recurring shocks, including flooding, conflict, and displacement.[70] As such, the 2024 Malakal assessment found that fish were the only available food source for most households.[71] Indeed, several female returnees in Fashoda reported not having access to any income and to only eat fish from the river.

In Juba, **a few participants from both population groups also reported paid employment** as a livelihood source for women in their area. Those who did mentioned government jobs, or working in saloons.

In both locations, **female returnees commonly reported to rely on support from relatives outside of their household** – either through receiving food or money from these relatives, or by being accommodated by them, helping them save costs on rent.

> *"My husband's relative, the uncle who accommodated us, is sometimes helping with food. If there is no food to eat, on those particular days [he gives us food]. And that is how we are struggling with finding food here."* – *II with a female returnee, Juba*

**Several host community members, in both Juba and Fashoda, reported *perceiving* that female returnees have different livelihood sources compared to female host community members** in their respective areas. While different explanations were provided in both locations, the common denominator in both locations seemed to be that female host community members perceived returnees to depend less on cultivation compared to female host community members.

> *"Yes the livelihood source differs based on the displacement status. For example, returnees do not like hardship [...]. Their livelihood sources are working in the market as casual workers and cooking, but they do not get out to go for farming or for firewood collection."- FGD with female host community members, Juba*

### (b) A wide array of challenges affected female returnees' and female host community members' abilities to make a livelihood

Aligning to participants' high reliance on markets to generate an income, the main livelihood challenges reported by participants from both population groups were challenges related to the running of their own business. **A lack of capital to start a business was commonly reported, as well as increased competition at local markets.** This was reportedly due to an increase in the number of women trying to sell the same product or service at local markets, resulting in a decreasing demand.

> *"In this area people find it easy to do small income generating activities. Almost everyone is in the market and this has created high competition. You find many people selling the same product, so the customers became few."* – *FGD with female host community members, Juba*

**Female returnees and female host community members also reported challenges related to employment opportunities in both locations**. Participants from both population groups perceived high competition for available jobs, and a lack of job opportunities in general. Some also spoke about a lack of family or personal connections hindering their ability to get a job.

> *"Here it is very difficult to get a job. Because even if you have a certificate, you will not get a position if you don't know anyone in an organization. They will pick the people they know"* – *II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

**Recurring shocks such as flooding and conflict were also reportedly hindering female returnees' and female host community members' access to livelihoods.** In Juba, participants mainly spoke about insecurity rendering certain livelihood options unavailable to them. In Fashoda, participants mostly voiced concerns related to flooding – affecting not just cultivation, as mentioned above, but also the accessibility of other livelihood options.

> *"The hard challenge is now flooding. The water is everywhere. Before this flood, women went to an area to get firewood and make charcoal. And they came and sold it to get money. But now the water makes that we cannot reach that area to get firewood."* – *FGD with female host community members, Fashoda*

### (c) In addition to the above challenges, findings indicated that female returnees faced additional barriers to livelihood sources

**Female returnees commonly reported they perceived livelihood opportunities to be more easily and readily available in Sudan**, compared to their current location. In addition to their husbands or relatives having paid employment in Sudan, most of these women reportedly had access to paid employment themselves too, allowing them to earn a stable daily or monthly salary.

Several participants from both population groups echoed the perception that, **compared to female host community members, female returnees face additional constraints to access livelihood sources in their areas of settlement**. These were mostly related to the differences in livelihood options available in their settlement area compared to Sudan – with traditional livelihood options in South Sudan being unfamiliar to them, and thus not as easily accessible to them as to the host community.

> *"We returnees are the most vulnerable people. These challenges have affected us most, since we are trying to integrate into the existing system. This seems not fair, because we have not gotten used to this bad situation. We are not used to hunger, and illnesses, and we do not know how to cultivate. We do not know, since our livelihood was working in the market and we found there is no market here" – FGD with female returnees, Fashoda*

In addition to the above, findings also indicate that **returnees without relatives in South Sudan, or without the ability to reach these relatives, may face additional livelihood challenges.** This aligns to the above findings showing the reliance on support from relatives.

> *"I have no relatives here, and no one from this community is offering me something for support. So this community is not good according to my understanding. It is not that they don't like people from Sudan, it is more that the situation is not allowing them to cooperate. The economic hardship is also in their mind, that is creating issues." – II with a female returnee, Juba.*

Due to their lack of family or social support systems, **these returnees are highly dependent on markets and available livelihood opportunities** in the area, which, in the current economic context of South Sudan, may make these women extra vulnerable.[72]

While not commonly reported, participants from one focus group discussion with female returnees in Juba did report discrimination of returnees by host community members to further constrain returnees' abilities to access livelihood sources in the areas of settlement.

> *"These challenges are affecting returnees most of the time, as they are trying to integrate into the host community and get into the existing system. When they search for casual work, people in the market keep on saying: we do not know you in this place, and we do not know where you came from, and at any time you may steal things in here, for example in the restaurants and in the tea place. This seems so discriminating."* – *FGD with female returnees, Juba*

### (d) These challenges may lead to severe livelihood conditions, and women may be particularly vulnerable – with indications of severe implications on their mental health as well

**As a result of these challenges, several participants – both female returnees and female host community members - reported not having access to any livelihood options** at the moment. One female returnee in Juba reported she was "waiting for assistance". Another female returnee in Juba reported only eating when other people offer her food.

> "*I am very tired of the situation here. Even at night, I do not sleep because of stress. If there would be an organization to help us with assistance, that would be helpful for us.*" – *II with a female returnee, Juba*

**Among the participants reporting they currently did not have access to any livelihood source, a clear desire to work was observed** – with several of them expressing they would engage in any suitable livelihood option that would be available to them in the community.

### (e) Female returnees and female host community members were reportedly not able to meet all their basic needs as they defined and prioritized them

Almost all participants in Juba and Fashoda, returnees and host communities alike, reported perceiving challenges in accessing basic services **resulting in an inability to meet all their needs as they defined and prioritized them**. The extent of this inability to access services differed, with several female returnees reporting not being able to access certain services such as education or healthcare, while other female returnees reported not being able to access any essential services outside of food – since their full income is spent on food, leaving no income to cater for other basic needs.

> *"I am working in the market, but this money will not be enough for me because I am doing two things; I am feeding my family here, and I have to get some money to get some other things. There is no other way to get money*" – *II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

### (f) While the lack of financial resources was perceived to be the main barrier in accessing essential services for both population groups, female returnees were particularly vulnerable

**Out of all reported challenges in accessing basic services, a lack of money was most often reported by participants from both population groups in Juba and Fashoda**. This aligns to findings from previous assessments conducted in Upper Nile State, where a lack of funds was observed to be a primary obstacle in accessing food or other essential services – corroborated by households' low economic capacity, limited market functionality outside of major towns, and persistently high food and commodity prices.[73] In Juba, participants specifically mentioned increased market prices and increases in rent to limit their ability to access essential services.

Across both locations, **female returnees often reported a lack of money for school fees**, reportedly resulting in many children not attending school. The lack of money for school fees was not reported by female host community members. **A lack of money to afford healthcare services, however, was reported by both female returnees and female host community members** in both locations. Participants from both population groups spoke about how medicines or services are often not available in public hospitals, forcing them to go to more expensive private health facilities, or having to purchase drugs from a pharmacy instead. The inability to afford healthcare services reportedly leads to people seeking traditional medicine practices.

> "*There is no health facility in this area, only in Kodok but these are expensive. So instead we do give traditional medicine to the sick, and that is why the majority of the sick people die on the*

*way to Kodok. There is no car, and there is no road that can facilitate people. We only use river routes" – II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

**In Juba and Fashoda, participants from both population groups iterated the perception that access to services is more difficult for female returnees compared to female host community members**. Participants linked this vulnerable position of female returnees to their weaker financial position compared to host community members. This was attributed to the observation that many female returnees arrive in their area of settlement without any financial resources, as well as to the aforementioned disproportionate barriers female returnees are facing in accessing livelihood sources upon arrival – due to their unfamiliarity with the area and traditional livelihood sources practiced there.

*"Things are different. For returnees, you will still be behind. Not like the person who is staying here. They may have many things, but we don't have anything." - FGD with female returnees, Fashoda*

### (g) In response to perceived challenges in accessing livelihood sources, female returnees reported individuals are increasingly resorting to a variety of negative coping mechanisms to meet their basic needs

In response to the aforementioned challenges in accessing basic services**, female returnees in Juba and Fashoda reported noticing an increase in several negative coping mechanisms in their settlement areas** – primarily an increase in early pregnancies and early marriages. Indeed, previous assessments have shown that, during crisis, the prevalence of early marriage may increase significantly as marriage is an important means of mobilizing material support and expanding social support networks.[74]

In Juba, some female returnees also reported noticing an increased number of women and girls selling their bodies in exchange for food or money to buy food. Also in Juba, several female returnees reported young boys joining gang groups due to a lack of job opportunities.

"*Here in the community, not only in this area but also in the neighbouring settlements in Juba, there is an increase in early marriages for girls. This is caused by the [economic] situation, which forces girls to opt for marriage so that they can be taken care of by their husband.*" *– II with a female returnee, Juba*

### (h) Women may carry an increasingly large burden when it comes to household livelihoods, potentially making them more vulnerable

While female returnees reported negative coping mechanisms adapted by women and men alike, findings also suggest that **women carry an increasingly large burden when it comes to household livelihoods** – potentially making them disproportionately vulnerable to such negative coping mechanisms.

Again, those **women who lack access to social support mechanisms may bear an additional burden**, as they not only carry the responsibility of taking care of household tasks, but also are the main, or only, breadwinner in the household. This aligns to findings from an assessment on Social Protection in South Sudan, conducted in 2025, which found that **women are increasingly taking up roles that were traditionally considered to be men's**, such as income generation.[75]

*"I am here alone because my husband has another wife. So I am struggling. School fees, catering for food, medication, I have to pay for all of it because the husband is not taking care of me. Since I am alone, and I'm only depending on the small business, it's very hard for me since the business cannot support us fully." – II with a female returnee, Juba*

### (i) Gender-biases in civic and political participation may outweigh potential exclusion based on displacement statuses

While some participants gave specific examples of women being invited to or actively participating in community meetings, **the large majority of both female returnees and female host community members in Juba and Fashoda reported never having tried to be actively involved in community decision-making** processes themselves.

> *"I have never attended any meeting with them [community leaders] to know if my voice can be heard by them. I am yet to know whether my voice can be heard." – II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

Despite not having tried to do so, several participants from both population groups in both locations reported they ***thought*** **their voice would be listened to in community decision making**, should they feel the need to voice their opinion or complaint to local leaders. In both locations, however, participants from both population groups also reported having noticed **several disparities in terms of the inclusion of various groups in communal decision-making processes.** First, in Fashoda, several female returnees felt **excluded from communal decision-making processes because of their age**. This aligns with cultural traditions among tribes in Fashoda, with women generally not included in communal decision-making until they are considered 'elderly' (roughly 50 years of age and above).[76]

> "*Because of my age, they are not going to listen to me. The people older than me, they can go to the chief or elders to tell important things, but not me.*" *– II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

Second, a few female returnees in both locations reportedly felt that **returnees were excluded from community decision-making processes.** This aligns with data from the 2024 ISNA, which showed considerable difference between host communities and returnees in terms of their reported involvement in community decision making[xxvi].

> *"I think that they will not listen to me because I am a newcomer. They will ask themselves: when did this girl come and what does she have to say? They will not listen to me." – II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

Third, in both Juba and Fashoda, several female returnees and female host community members reported they perceived **the voices of women, irrespective of their displacement status, being excluded** from communal decision-making processes. The limited involvement of women in these processes is reflected in findings from the 2024 ISNA as well, which showed that, in both locations, a considerable proportion of returnee and host community households reported women rarely or not at all involved in decision-making.[77]

> "*In this community, leaders do not consider women's voices. They listen only to men, so I do not even bother to tell my opinion. This is because of cultural reasons. Men are not aware that they can be equal to women in this community.*" *– II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

Taken together, these findings suggest that **gender-biases in civic and political participation may outweigh potential exclusion based on displacement statuses**. Such exclusion based on displacement status did not seem to be an overwhelming perception among participants in both

[xxvi] In Fashoda, all host community households reported to be involved 'a lot' in community decision making, which was reported by only 23 percent of returnee households. The majority of returnee households (68 percent) reported feeling 'moderately' involved in community decision making instead, and 8 percent reported feeling 'a little' involved or 'not at all' involved. In Juba, the proportion of households reporting to not be involved in community decision-making at all was particularly high among returnee households (at 27 percent). Here, households' participation in community decision-making was reportedly lower overall – with 72 percent of host community households feeling either 'a lot' or 'moderately' involved, compared to 60 percent of returnee households.

locations. It is important to consider, however, that the current assessment focused specifically on *women's* perceptions. Since women in host communities are already facing considerable barriers to participating in community decision-making processes, as shown before, female returnees are likely to be excluded from such processes based on their gender as well.

## Perspectives on social cohesion between returnees and host communities in Juba and Fashoda

**In contexts of protracted crises, where formal governance structures are often weak or non-existent, communities depend heavily on local systems for social and economic support**. In the face of shocks, communities themselves are the first ones to respond – reacting long before the arrival of humanitarian actors. As such, **social connections** and **social cohesion** are of utmost importance in helping populations manage shocks and stresses – particularly in times of crisis.[78]

This sub-section outlines assessment findings related to participants' perspectives on social cohesion in Juba and Fashoda, i.e. to what extent returnees and host communities are interacting with each other ('social mixing') and perceptions on the relationships between these two groups.

### (a) Social mixing between female returnees and female host communities was reportedly widespread, and social support mechanisms were repeatedly raised as examples of a positive relationship between both groups

While a few female returnees reported social isolation from the host community, which was primarily attributed to feelings of having more in common with other returnees, **the majority of participants in both Juba and Fashoda iterated equal participation of female host community members and female returnees in social life**. Female returnees and female host community members are reportedly interacting at a variety of occasions, including church, funerals, or other communal occasions. In both locations, participants also commonly reported interacting with their neighbours of different displacement status, and their children to go to school together and play together.

> *"This is a peaceful area where both us [the returnees] and the owners of the area are very actively interacting. We mourn together and celebrate together, and this is the point of settling in this community.' – FGD with female returnees, Juba*

The 2024 ISNA found no major differences between returnee and host community households in terms of their participation in social and religious activities.[79] Even more, in Fashoda, involvement in such activities by returnee households was reportedly very high – with over 95 percent of households reporting to be involved in religious and social activities. While lower proportions of religious and social participation were observed in Juba, this was observed for both returnee and host community households alike.

While participants from both population groups in Juba and Fashoda mentioned social mixing to occur frequently, **different perspectives were observed in terms of whether the relationship between host communities and returnees was positive or negative**. In both locations, **a majority of participants from both population groups reported social dynamics among the two groups to be generally positive**. Several participants reported the two groups to be living together peacefully, and that no major tensions or disputes have occurred as a result of their different statuses.

Even more, participants provided several examples of both population groups supporting each other, e.g. through sharing money or food, through taking care of each other's children, or through comforting each other and giving each other advice. This suggests that, **while some participants perceived communal support mechanisms to be mainly one-way, i.e. host community members**

**supporting new arrivals, others perceived there to be two-way communal support mechanisms** between both population groups as well. In Juba, for example, returnees elaborated on women's group being established by females in the community – in which returnee women and host community women are engaged equally.

> *"We do normally meet with our fellow women during Sanduk[xxvii] time, which is normally done every Sunday in the evening. We meet in one house and interact while contributing some money and a half bar of soap each. We give it to the house owner of the house where we are meeting, and this is done rotationally. Within the group we have female IDPs, HC and returnees including a few refugees."* – *FGD with female returnees, Juba*

Previous assessments have found that such **ways of non-material support, i.e. through emotional support, advice or counsel, was deemed to be of particular importance by women** – and a central aspect to households' perception of their own resilience.[80] Nevertheless, findings from the 2024 ISNA show that the large majority of host community and returnee households in both Juba and Fashoda seeks emotional support from relatives first – reported by over 96 percent of host community and returnee households in Fashoda. While, in Juba, family was the most commonly reported emotional support mechanism as well, a larger proportion of host community and returnee households reported relying on the community for emotional support as well (12 percent and 8 percent, respectively). These findings indicate that, in both locations, both returnee and host community households are still largely dependent on emotional support through their families. As such, returnees settling in areas without their relatives may have limited access to these preferred, and much-needed, emotional support mechanisms.

### (b) Some examples of tensions over access to livelihood options and resources between returnees and host communities were reported – partly attributed to perceived obligatory sharing norms

In Juba and Fashoda, **several participants cited examples of what they considered bad relationships between returnees and host community members**, such as different groups not greeting each other on the street, and how they perceived there were ongoing tensions between the groups. **Reasons provided for such tensions were almost exclusively related to access to resources and livelihoods**, with the majority of female host community members reporting the influx of returnees had negatively affected livelihood opportunities for the host community.

In addition to establishing non-material support mechanisms, **positive relationships between returnees and the host community are also important in establishing material support mechanisms**, i.e. the sharing and/or borrowing of resources among households. This type of support is a key coping and recovery mechanism in contexts of protracted crises, with socially connected households 'better able to diversify their diets and are more optimistic that they can cope and recover in face of future shocks and stresses'.[81] It is also a core social protection mechanisms across South Sudan, relying on the principle that each community member is expected to assist those in need.[82] However, previous research has shown that such obligatory sharing norms can also contribute to household vulnerability. [83] In the words of Kim et al. (2020)[84], households may have to make difficult choices – either 'allocate limited resources to meet immediate basic needs while risking exclusion from reciprocal support systems, or share beyond their means and potentially go hungry in order to maintain and build social connections for future support'.[85] This has the potential to fuel tensions

[xxvii] In this context, "Sanduk" (Arabic for "saving box") is used to describe Village Saving & Loan Associations (VSLAs). These are community-based loan and saving structures. Within each group, members collectively save money and allow their members to take small loans from those savings. After a agreed-upon period of time, the accumulated savings and loan profits are distributed back to its members.

between both population groups, as host community households may feel forced to share their limited resources with newly arrived returnee households.

This aligns to this assessment's findings, suggesting that such **sharing mechanisms are influencing social connections and relationships between groups**: several female host community members reported tensions between groups to have risen over a perceived unwillingness from the host community to share their resources with returnees. The perceived additional burden on host communities, i.e. having to share their limited resources with an increasing number of new arrivals, was also recognized by several returnees in the individual interviews.

> "*People are not on good terms since everything is exhausted, and it has led to hatred in the community. Returnees think that we have food that we do not want to give them, and we think they do not want to work to get food by themselves.*" - *FGD with female host community members, Fashoda*

In addition to this, several host community participants reported that **returnees are sometimes perceived to be 'lazy' by host community members**, as returnees would depend on support from host community members without actively seeking alternative ways to make their own living. Indeed, in one of the group discussions with female host community members, participants expressed their frustration over the dependence of returnees on host communities.

> "*Returnees are lazy. They do not want to help in the resource collection, they do not want to eat food that is not good, but they do not want to work. How long will they depend on us as host communities?*" – *FGD with female host community members, Juba*

### (c) Despite some tensions reported, social dynamics between returnees and host communities were generally perceived to be positive

Despite the reports of tensions described above, the findings suggest that **social dynamics among both population groups are generally positive in Juba and Fashoda**. In the case of Fashoda, this may in large part be due to returnees returning to the areas they are originally from, and still have strong social and cultural ties with. Indeed, in Fashoda, participants also referred to the perception of still being "one people" which, according to them, has also contributed to the good relationship between host communities and returnees.

> *"In terms of interaction in the community, as returnees, I do not feel differences since we do understand each other, because we use the same language, people are getting married within the community, and we are all from the same tribe. We normally pray together and do visit each other in sorrow and in happiness" – FGD with female returnees, Fashoda*

This aligns to the observations from previous assessments on returnee integration and social cohesion.[86] In the case of Juba, this may be slightly different. While returnees here also reported family reunification as their main reason for settlement in the area, this did not seem to be linked to being originally from the area or identifying Juba as their area of origin. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in Juba, less competition over scarce resources was perceived – with the exception of livelihood sources - as access to services was reportedly readily available to all those who have the financial capacity to afford them.

## Female returnees' understanding of the concept of integration, and main challenges encountered in working towards integration in Juba and Fashoda

This sub-section outlines assessment findings related to female returnees' perspectives on their own integration, i.e. to what extent they feel integrated into the community in their area of settlement, what the term integration means to them, and factors enabling or hindering integration according to them.

### (a) Resilience and self-reliance were the most important aspects of integration according to female returnees

Asked about their view on the concept of '*integration into the host community*', female returnees in both Juba and Fashoda most often stressed the aspect of self-reliance. **Becoming independent of support from the host community, through having access to an income and thus being able to access necessary basic services, was considered a necessary prerequisite** by the large majority of female returnees. Access to their own land was also often reported by female returnees, albeit slightly less often.

> *"I will consider myself integrated when I am able to depend on my own, and not other people like my relatives. That can be after I get a job, and buy myself a land and shelter, get access to all the basic services" – FGD with female returnees, Juba*

Self-reliance was also one of the most-cited factors by IDPs in a previous study on Durable Solutions in South Sudan.[87] The importance of self-reliance of (previously-)displaced individuals is recognized in several international frameworks as well, including the Progressive Resolution of Displacement Solutions from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the African Union convention for the protection and assistance of IDPs in Africa (the Kampala Convention).[88] More specifically, and in line with the Kampala Convention[89], this assessment's findings align with previous assessments which found that the extent to which integration happens in part depends on access to money – which, in turn, contributes to self-reliance.

**While most returnees spoke about their self-sufficiency and resilience when asked about the concept of integration, some also mentioned prerequisites related to social dynamics** such as having respect for others, actively participating in social life, or working and living together as equals in the same area.

### (b) Perceptions on their own level of integration varied greatly between participants, suggesting that integration is a dynamic concept that depends on a variety of factors and conditions

**About half of the female returnees in both Juba and Fashoda reported not feeling integrated** into the host community in their area of settlement. Similar to observations from previous studies[90], female returnees reported their reliance on the host community to be severe and considered this to be a major barrier for social integration. Only two participants reported not feeling integrated due to reasons related to social dynamics, i.e. perceiving no interest from the host community into their well-being or their children not wanting to adapt to life in South Sudan.

> *"I am not integrated into this community, because I still need time to integrate. I am hosted by my father-in-law, he is the one taking care of me and my children. There is no privacy, I cannot feed my children, I cannot take them to school, I cannot buy clothes and I cannot fully have access to the basic needs as I want. And integration means having full access to what you need."*
> *- II with a female returnee, Fashoda.*

**About half of the participants reported to, overall, feel integrated** into the host community in their respective area of settlement. Participants cited this was mostly due to an equal participation in

social life: attending social occasions together, going to church together, eating together, among others. Some specifically mentioned similarities to their lives in Khartoum, which helped them feel at home in their area of settlement.

> *"In Khartoum, we were also living together like that with our neighbours. So you visit each other, interact, advise each other, that makes me feel at home." – II with a female returnee, Juba*

Again, **self-reliance was the most often reported prerequisite to integration according to female returnees in both locations, and the lack of it was cited by several participants as the main reason for *not* feeling integrated.** Indeed, while several participants reported to feel integrated overall, self-sufficiency was rarely cited as a contributing factor. These findings suggest that **integration is not an 'all or nothing' condition but, rather, a more fluid social construct** depending on different variables and conditions. Indeed, there were also some participants who mentioned feeling integrated but, at the same time, to also feel as a guest. This strengthens findings from previous assessments, showing that displacement is *'a dynamic continuum, where displaced persons can take steps towards integrating into the host community over time, or can be made to take steps backwards.'*.[91]

Whilst a dynamic concept, previous work has shown the importance of 'achieving' integration of displaced persons – i.e. being considered to be a resident, rather than a displaced individual, in the wider community. Such a change in one's status has large implications for the types of relationships one can build, and the type of support one can rely on from the community – with, generally, more support from the community being available once an individual is considered resident.[92] In some of the interviews conducted by female returnees, the choice of wording echoed a **perceived importance of integrating into host communities, with returnees emphasizing 'having to' integrate**.

> *"We have left Khartoum and I became one of this host community. And because it is also my land, I have to forget that I am a Khartouma." – II with a female returnee, Fashoda*

## Humanitarian service provision in Juba and Fashoda, and perceived disparities in service provision

This sub-section outlines assessment findings related to humanitarian service provision. It outlines participants' perception on the fairness of aid delivery in Juba and Fashoda, and potential disparities noted. The sub-section concludes with participants' perceptions on the types of aid which are most needed in their area – either by the whole community, or specifically by women or returnees.

### (a) Awareness of aid delivery in the assessed areas was low among both female returnees and female host community members

**In both locations, the majority participants reported they were either not aware of humanitarian assistance being delivered in their area**, or that they did not have information on the assistance delivered in their area since they themselves were not registered for it. Indeed, a recent assessment conducted in Upper Nile state found that aid agencies faced persistent access challenges, resulting in only a fraction of the targeted population receiving humanitarian food assistance.[93]

A few female returnees residing in Juba reported that, before they arrived in the area, they had expected aid to be delivered but had not heard of any aid delivery since their arrival.

> *"In Khartoum a person told me that there would be organizations supporting us when we arrived in Juba. But since I arrived here, I have not seen any of them. I only see their cars drive on the street but none of them has visited me." – II with a female returnee, Juba*

### (b) While some participants considered humanitarian assistance to be delivered in a fair and equal manner, disparities in humanitarian service delivery were reported as well

Among those who were aware of aid distribution in their area, different perceptions were reported on the fairness of humanitarian aid delivery. While, in both Juba and Fashoda, some perceived aid distribution to happen in a fair and equal manner, **a larger number of participants from both population groups reported inequalities or unfairness in aid distribution** in their area. Most often reported was perceived nepotism by community leaders – either through leaders registering their own relatives or friends over others, or through leaders taking away assistance after distribution from those it was delivered to.

While one previous assessment observed displaced individuals' perceptions of chiefs not distributing assistance to people who were not originally from the area, thus reinforcing the non-recipients' perceptions that they were not treated equally[94], this assessment's findings suggest that **nepotism by community leaders was felt by returnees and host community members alike** – suggesting this did not necessarily have to do with one's displacement status. However, some participants did specifically mention they perceived their displacement status to be a barrier to receive humanitarian assistance.

> *"It is very difficult to get this assistance. They are registering the people who they know only. When I am the one registering and I know she is a returnee, I can go and I jump to the next person for registration and skip her. Because I am coming from Khartoum, that is why I was not included." – II with a female returnee, Fashoda.*

Such narratives suggest that **households that are better connected, particularly to local leaders and authorities, may be better able to access external aid and other resources** in times of need, potentially at the expense of households who most need the assistance.[95]

### (c) In some cases, information provision on humanitarian assistance was perceived to be inadequate

**Several participants, particularly from Fashoda, reported uncertainties in terms of why humanitarian assistance was delivered the way it was** – not understanding why certain groups were included, while others were not.

> *"When they are registering people's names, some people don't know. You will only know when people are receiving. Then when you ask those people: when did you register your name, they say "we just registered". It's so painful, because I want to have it and I need it but they did not write down my name. People don't tell that there is an organization that comes and wants to register people. There is no information about registration, not from community leaders or anyone." - II with a female returnee, Fashoda.*

This aligns to findings from a previous assessment, which found that communication between humanitarian organizations and communities, both host communities and returnees alike, was virtually non-existent. The role of informing affected populations about assistance was instead fully deferred to community leaders.[96] Previous studies have shown that a lack of transparency or knowledge about selection procedures for humanitarian assistance can lead to tensions between different groups.[97]

### (d) Inequalities in aid distribution have harmed relationships between different groups

Some participants reported these **inequalities in the distribution of aid to have resulted in tensions between different groups** – either between the community (host and returnees alike) and

community leaders, or between host communities and returnees themselves. Furthermore, in Fashoda, participants also noted that it is hard for vulnerable people to see how other individuals are receiving assistance, while they themselves are not.

> *"Sometimes we face challenges because the services are not enough. If all of them [all displacement groups] are included, the services are not enough. So those who have not received still feel like they are neglected" – KII with a women leader, Fashoda*

### (e) Participants reported specific needs for women they felt needed to be addressed by humanitarian service providers

In addition to a reportedly overall need for humanitarian assistance to establish water points, improve healthcare and education, and provide non-food items, **participants from both population groups in Juba and Fashoda also emphasized perceiving a need for GBV-related services** for women in their area. The need for women's centres, or more specifically Women and Girls Friendly Spaces, was most commonly voiced. Here, participants most often stressed the importance of such centres in bringing together women from all different groups in the community to share experience and advice – reinforcing the above findings on the perceived importance of non-material support mechanisms, particularly for women.

This assessment's findings have also shown indications that, **in some areas, women are already self-organizing in informal women's groups which serve as a platform for social interaction and connectedness**. In addition to the potential role of these centres in offering non-material support, several participants also spoke about the potential of livelihood support for women through these centres. Some of them specifically requested for different livelihood activities to be undertaken in such centres, such as crochet and making bedsheets, which would allow them to make a small income from selling their crafted products on the markets.

> *"All women who are here, they need to have a centre, a safe space. Because people sit together, and they distribute to women many things like bedsheets and crochet, and they are sharing their ideas together and they know each other together there." – FGD with female returnees, Fashoda*

Additionally, participants also voiced a perceived need for the provision of dignity kits and sanitary pads, as well as for counselling services.

### (f) Participants from both population groups echoed the need of protection services for returnees

While some of the aforementioned challenges returnees are facing were reflected in the types of assistance they reportedly needed, i.e. food, shelter and cash assistance, **female returnees and female host community members most often reported a need for protection services**, specifically counselling.

> *"We returnees need a centre for training in livelihood skills and also we require psychosocial support in terms of counselling, Most of the returnees were faced with different challenges, some have seen dead bodies on the way and some were harassed, some were looted. And following this economic hardship which has worsened peoples' status of being traumatized, and we do not find the reason why we came back to our country." – II with a female returnee, Juba*

Some participants also repeated perceiving a need for **livelihood support for returnees**, echoing the above-mentioned challenges these returnees are facing in establishing sustainable livelihood strategies. Considering the high emphasis that participants placed on self-reliance as a prerequisite of their integration into the community, it makes sense that livelihood support was commonly reported as a hope for the future.

## CONCLUSION

**The findings indicate that while most female returnees have reached their intended areas of settlement, they continue to face significant vulnerabilities**. The journey itself was marked by severe hardships, including exposure to violence, trauma, and economic deprivation, which persist even after arrival.

**A key challenge for female returnees is economic instability.** Many rely on precarious livelihood sources, and their limited access to financial resources exacerbates their inability to meet basic needs, such as food, healthcare, and education. Additionally, social cohesion between returnees and host communities is varied, with some cases of integration but also reports of tensions over limited resources. Disparities in humanitarian aid distribution, often perceived as influenced by nepotism and opaque targeting practices, further strain relationships between groups.

**The lack of adequate protection services, particularly for gender-based violence (GBV) survivors, remains a pressing concern**. While some support structures exist, such as informal women's groups, access to formal GBV response services is inconsistent and often inadequate. The need for psychosocial support, safe spaces, and economic empowerment opportunities for female returnees is critical to their long-term stability and integration.

**These findings are particularly concerning given South Sudan's worsening humanitarian context.** Acute food insecurity, already widespread, is expected to deteriorate further as the country enters the lean season, alongside increasing flood risks and escalating tensions in various regions.[98] The continued deterioration of the economic situation, with rapid inflation and rising food prices, further exacerbates these challenges. At the same time, the conflict in Sudan shows no signs of abating, likely driving continued displacement of both returnees and refugees to South Sudan. Recent shifts in the humanitarian funding landscape have resulted in many aid programs to be terminated, and further funding cuts could have severe consequences.

**This worsening humanitarian context may contribute to growing frustration and hopelessness among both returnees and host communities,** likely to intensify underlying tensions and potentially leading to conflict in areas of settlement. In crisis situations, social cohesion is often the first to erode. While relations between returnees and host communities may currently be stable, the combined pressures of rising displacement, worsening economic conditions, deteriorating food security, and increasing resource scarcity could rapidly destabilize this fragile balance in the near future.

## PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

**Continued work is needed to promote social integration of female returnees into host communities in areas of settlement** – to ensure that, in light of increased stresses or shocks, current bonds between host communities and returnees will hold, and efficient social support mechanisms are in place. Several recommendations have been drafted to help key stakeholders work towards this. These are preliminary recommendations made by the research team based on the key take-aways from our analysis. To develop and finalise these recommendations further, additional discussion among relevant stakeholders and working groups could be helpful in the future.

### Recommendation 1: Create a better understanding of local support structures, and the factors influencing inclusion and exclusion

- Aid actors should take steps to understand who is included and excluded from social support networks to better assess conditions of vulnerability. Identifying key household- and community-level factors shaping social connectedness is essential for designing interventions that strengthen household resilience through these networks.
- A more nuanced understanding of local support mechanisms is needed. This assessment's findings, in line with previous studies, highlight the complexity of communal sharing, where both material and non-material support can either strengthen resilience or deepen vulnerability. Understanding the informal rules and norms governing resource-sharing is crucial for designing interventions that reinforce, rather than disrupt, existing social structures.
- Furthermore, the findings also highlighted key differences in female returnees' experiences in Fashoda, where a sense of belonging to the area and its community was commonly reported, and Juba, where this was less so. This also signals the importance of developing contextualized programming based on existing social connections between different displacement groups, and current sharing mechanisms.

### Recommendation 2: Strengthen social support and community-led protection initiatives

- Greater dialogue is needed between local populations, service providers, and authorities on area-based and community-led approaches to durable solutions. Authorities should ensure inclusive participation, particularly for returnees, women, and other vulnerable groups.
- To promote local solutions and enhance social cohesion, authorities, with support from relevant partners, should identify and map local resilience initiatives led by civil society actors and support their capacity where needed.
- Humanitarian actors should support existing community-led social protection and support initiatives, which play a crucial role in providing psychosocial support. In the past, humanitarian interventions have at times weakened these community-led efforts by replacing caregivers or operating parallel to traditional structures. Aid actors should prioritize working with and strengthening local, informal initiatives or, at the very least, ensure they do not undermine them.[99]

### Recommendation 3: Develop gender-sensitive programming to foster social cohesion and work towards integration

- Women play a key role in social integration processes in areas of settlement, particularly through non-material support mechanisms that strengthen social cohesion between host communities and returnees. Given the high value women place on social connections and their active role in fostering relationships, integration initiatives should be designed with a gender-sensitive approach that leverages this potential.

- Despite their involvement in localized support networks, women often face barriers to civic and political participation. Strengthening their role in community decision-making and removing these barriers is essential. Supporting women's organizations—already recognized as trusted and effective infrastructures—can be a key strategy for humanitarian and development actors to enhance women's engagement in governance and integration efforts.

### Recommendation 4: Scale up humanitarian service delivery, focused on onward transportation as well as GBV and protection services in areas of settlement, recognizing returnee populations crossing the border into South Sudan may be increasingly vulnerable

- Given the persistent challenges in South Sudan, including insecurity, flooding, and food scarcity, displacement is likely to continue or worsen in the coming months. Some returnees may choose to leave their settlement areas in search of better livelihood opportunities and essential services, while others may remain in congested border and transit areas, further straining already limited resources. With an increasingly vulnerable population of displaced individuals expected to cross into South Sudan, there is an urgent need to scale up service delivery in transit areas.
- Furthermore, considering the critical role of transportation assistance and recent funding constraints, humanitarian, development, and other key stakeholders must collaborate to address this growing gap in humanitarian service provision with a particular focus on enabling onwards transportation for displaced populations.
- Scale up GBV and protection service delivery in areas of settlement, particularly counselling services, to address the considerable unmet needs – recognizing that, with the extent of returnee populations requiring such services as of present, it is likely that a worsening of the situation in both Sudan and South Sudan may lead to increased traumatization for populations who will return in the coming months and thus to an even higher need for such services in areas of settlement. Furthermore, scaling up GBV service delivery in areas of settlement will also help improve the quality of referral pathways. Partners need to continue to closely collaborate to mitigate challenges related to short-term budgets and timelines of GBV programmes.

### Recommendation 5: Find sustainable solutions for long-term resilience of households, focusing on economic opportunities

- This assessment's findings show the need to find sustainable solutions that address both communities' immediate need, as well as contribute to their longer-term resilience. To help returnees escape the cycle of dependence, humanitarian and development actors must focus on programs that reduce economic instability, such as access to income-generating activities, vocational training, and financial literacy.
- When implementing livelihood interventions, it is crucial to conduct a thorough analysis of local market dynamics to ensure the viability of specific livelihoods in the context, and their capacity to absorb new participants. Overcrowding a particular economic sector, as the findings have shown, could undermine individuals' resilience and strain social support networks, as these are closely linked to the economic sustainability of the group and the strength of its members' social ties.

# ANNEXES

## Annex A: Research questions

### (a) Research questions for objective 1

The following research questions were developed to help address the first research objective:

1. **What are the perceived main challenges for returnee women in each phase of the return process until arrival in their area of settlement?**
    a. What are the reported key challenges female returnees faced on their journey from Sudan to their area of settlement?
    b. What do female returnees identify as their main challenges upon settling in their final destination? What are their priority unmet needs?
    c. What are the main drivers of these needs, according to them?
2. **Why are female returnees choosing to settle in and/or leave their current location?**
3. **What are perspectives of female host community members on the influx of returnees in Juba, Fashoda and Aweil East counties, particularly in relation to the abilities of host community members to meet their essential needs?**
4. **What are female returnees' and female host community members' perspectives on Social Inclusion in areas of settlement?**
    a. What are differences in access to livelihoods (financial resources and employment opportunities) that female returnees and female host community members perceive between these two groups?
    b. What are differences in access to basic services (food, health, education, shelter, etc) that female returnees and female host community members perceive between these two groups?
    c. What are differences in civic and political participation that female returnees and female host community members perceive between these two groups?
5. **What are female returnees' and female host community members' perspectives on Social Cohesion in areas of settlement?**
    a. What are perspectives of female host community members and female returnees on the extent to which social mixing occurs?
    b. What are perspectives of female host community members and female returnees on relationship dynamics between different displacement groups, and what enablers and constraints do they perceive to influence these relationships?
6. **What are the main challenges, if any, female returnees are perceiving regarding their integration into the host community?**

7. **What are female returnees' and female host community members' perspectives on humanitarian service provision, particularly differences between displacement groups**?

    a. Do female returnees and female host community perceive any disparities in humanitarian service provision between these different groups? And if so, how do they perceive these disparities to have influences community relations between groups?

    b. What are main inclusion and exclusion criteria influencing access to humanitarian aid, according to female returnees and female host community members?

### (b) Research questions for objective 2

The following research questions were developed to help address the second research objective:

1. **What are service providers' perspectives on the availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of GBV response services delivered in Fashoda, Juba and Aweil East counties?**
    a. What formal and communal support mechanisms are available in Juba, Fashoda and Aweil East counties to address GBV concerns? *(availability)*
    b. What are the main challenges in the provision of GBV response services? And how does this affect the quality of services delivered? *(quality)*
    c. To what extent do potential GBV survivors/victims have access to necessary GBV response services in areas of settlement? Does access to these services differ for population groups and, if so, why? *(accessibility)*
    d. To what extent are GBV response services tailored to the local context? *(acceptability)*
2. **To what extent are female returnees aware of GBV response services in their area of settlement?**
    a. What are female returnees perspectives on the availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of these services?

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