

# Cultural Impact and an Intimate Partner aggression in African Societies: A comparison of Rwanda and South Sudan

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DOI: 10.2478/eujss-2023-0012

## Abstract

**The study investigated the** role of cultural impact on South Sudanese and Rwandan women who nowadays reside in the diaspora in Finland and Belgium. It explores the cultural violence against women before and after the 1994 Rwandan genocide against the Tutsis, and after the independency of South Sudan. This argument is presented through an analysis of existing literature and documents; and through interviews with 341 respondents (166 men and 175 women) belonging to the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium and in Finland; and 420 participants (302 females and 118 males) married, divorced, single mothers in South Sudan. The results show that women and girls in South Sudan continue to be at risk of violence from cultural impact more than Rwandan women. Poverty, education, and insecurity play a huge role in promoting aggression against South Sudanese women.

**Keywords:** Cultural, Intimate Partner Aggression, woman, African societies, Rwanda, South Sudan

## Introduction

Every Society or group of people in the world has its own social way of life, guided by the cultural norms and beliefs. The cultural norm regulates and controls the behavior of people (Wadesango, Rembe & Chabaya, 2011). In the twenty-four years ago, Rwanda has become infamous for political turmoil and ethnic conflict (Gall, 1998, p. 360; Hinga, Kubai, Mwaura, & Ayanga, 2008, p. 49). South Sudan as a new country, violence against women is still rampant in the homes and the refugee camps (Elia, 2007). Historically, and culturally, the African women have always been oppressed, discriminated against because of the notion that they would become only wives and mothers (Adekunle, 2007, p. 8; Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974, p. 24). For instance, in

Rwanda, women have received very little education in pre-genocide. Girls made up 45% of primary school students, but by secondary school, boys outnumbered girls 9 to 1. By university level, that disparity had risen to 15 to 1. Thus, Rwanda has many illiterate women who did not have a chance to go to school. They have to be at home doing hard labor and looking after cattle (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974, p. 34; Human Rights Watch 1996; Rwomire, 2001, p. 101 & Katongole, 2002, p. 178). In South Sudan, women are forced into marriage, marrying when they are very young, have sexual harassment, and they do not have their own properties, and they cannot get child custody (HSBA, 2004). Throughout the world, cultural traditions pose obstacles to women as less important than men, less deserving of basic life support, or of fundamental rights that are strongly correlated with quality of life, such as the right to study and the right to political participation (Nussbaum & Glover, 1995, p. 2; Vorster, 2004, p. 177). In addition, cultural norms and attitudes in many African societies such as Rwanda and South Sudan, contribute greatly to relegating girls to the position of second-class citizens with little say in matters of sexuality. In addition, in some African societies, women are socialized to the humble, submissive and they are brought up to believe that men have the right to dictate them (Hinga et al., 2008, p. 4). Thus, in many African societies such as Rwanda and South Sudan, the gender hierarchy is manifested in family relationships, inheritance laws, and customs; valuations of woman's work and its general invisibility; and the power to make decisions in society; the family, workplace, religious and cultural institutions (Mikkola, 2005, p. 13).

Furthermore, in Kinyarwanda (language), the word for man is “umugabo” which can be used to refer to someone who is courageous, responsible, daring, decisive and self-assured. The word for woman, however, is “umugore” which can have just the opposite meaning. Rwandan men use the term ironically in the context of a person's idea not having value; like “women's ideas” meaning that women cannot give good ideas (Rakocsy, 2004, p. 28). In most African societies, every child boy, on marriage, receives from his parents a matrimonial title which is a piece of land on which to build a dwelling house, another piece of land for the young couple to farm. He receives cattle and food for consumption. However, the child girl does not have such rights (Ntampaka, 1997, p. 12; Ayisi, 1979, p. 34). According to the Rwandan constitution, article 16, stipulates that the state shall ensure the elimination of discrimination against women and also ensure the protection of the rights of the woman, child and ethnic background (Republic of Rwanda, 2018, p. 12). However, in many African countries, like in Rwanda evidence of a survey shows that parents prefer boys; a family that has two sons may decide that they have no need for further children since they do not really value girls. A family with two girls may, however, decide to go on having children in the hope of having a boy (Vorster, 2007, p. 186; Mikkola, 2005, p.13).

## **Definition of Culture**

Culture is described as heterogeneous, fluid, shifting, emergent, procession, and other such descriptions which aim to capture indeterminateness about the idea (Fox 2011). The culture of a people may also be defined as the sum total of the material and intellectual equipment whereby they satisfy their biological and social needs and adapt themselves to their environment. It includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Ayisi, 1979; Murphy, 1989, pp. 26–27). It is like the air we breathe which cannot be seen, but we need it for our daily life. People are attached among themselves based on cultural perspectives, meaning to what they see and hear (Malsumoto, 2007). However, it is through our invisible culture lens that we judge people's behavior to be truthful, rude, and intelligent (Soetan, 2001). Behavior-based on cultural perspectives mostly creates inequality e.g., a woman cannot be a chief, resulting into men dominance of policies concerning social, political policies, economic and social structures in hierarchical society which indirectly cause suffering to women (WHO, 2015). Culture is the logic by which it gives people guidelines how to live in their own society. Cultural values are a behavior of specific group learned from parents, siblings, pears and others who share the same culture (Valsiner, 2007). It has a significant role to play in all societies (Murphy, 1989, pp. 24–31; Rwomire, 2001, p. 55; Katongole, 2002, p. 204). Culture may also have an impact on the life cycle of the society and culture may affect family structure, patterns of influence among family members, relations with others, role performance and responsibilities, marriage, work, communication patterns, living and consumptions, as well as health and illness behavior (Rwomire, 2001, pp. 56–57).

## **Cultural impact on African women- Aggression**

In the seventy years following the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, scholars have embraced predominantly ethical relativist stance toward the idea of gender equality as a universal concern for all cultures (Fox 2011). Due to lack of education, culture became the fuel that is fueling aggression in most of the African families, and societies (Deater-Deckard, & Dodge, 1997). Intimate partner violence can be in the form of physical, sexual, economic, cyber or psychological aggression regardless of gender (Fearon, 2003). Aggressive styles are also subject to developmental changes during the life course (Björkqvist, 1994). As a result, there is no generalized single form of intimate partner aggression (Archer, 2000). Traditionally and customary marriage in Rwanda and South Sudan, girls do not have the rights to decide or to choose their partners. Parents and family members play a huge role in assisting their daughter or son in selecting a marital partner or in giving approval to the relationship (Bujo, 1998, pp. 94–95; Adekunle, 2007, p. 105; Mbiti, 1990, pp. 132–133). Furthermore, under the colonial Civil Code, a married woman had no legal capacity unless she was authorized

by her husband (Brosche, 2008; Ntampaka, 1997, p. 9). South Sudan cultural values which address marriage, child custody, inheritance, and divorce has long been a target for reform for women's freedom and full participation in social and political force (Offenhauer & Buchalter, 2005).

A study published by Rwanda's Ministry of Family and Gender Promotion in 2004 shows that over a five-year period, 32.4 percent of Rwandan women experienced verbal or physical abuse in their communities by someone other than their partners. In addition, the study shows that in the two years between 2002 and 2004, there was 6,440 known instance of gender-based violence, between 75 and 80 percent of which were perpetrated against minors. Furthermore, Human Rights Watch also reported that Rwandan women who have experienced sexual violence are unfavorably affected by isolation and trauma as well as by the societal stigmatization of being rape victims and of persons living with HIV/AIDS, and may as a result of these pressures be forced into prostitution (UNHRW, 2007). The young children are being raped in increasing numbers at secondary schools, and for a woman to get the job, she has to perform sexual intercourse with a male boss.

But due to male physical superiority and aggression against women creates enormous long-term physical and psychological consequences (Tracy, 2007). A Rwandan 1998 national survey by the Ministry of Health revealed that three out of every four households are girl children; this obviously places them in a higher risk of HIV/AIDS infection (Hinga et al., 2008, p. 57).

### **Situation of Women in African societies**

In Rwanda and in South Sudan for a boy to get married, he has to pay a lot of both money and livestock (Beswick, 2001). Women are sold to other families in the name of marriage (Beswick, 2001; Bubenzer, & Stern, 2011). After marriage usually, a new family is formed and at the sometime sex differences roles based on cultural perspective emerged (Costa Jr, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001). Females and males differ in some ways and are similar in others (Halpern, 2013). Nowadays, some foreign cultures which brought after indecency of South Sudan have restructured the gender roles (Jok, 1999). Upon Rwandan or south Sudanese father's death or retirement from active labor, his land and property are traditionally divided between his sons. The eldest surviving son is expected to take care of his mother and any unmarried sisters after his father's death. While wives and daughters have not formally been prohibited from inheriting, in practice inheritance by women has been difficult (Kahne & Giele, 1992, p. 53; Mbiti, 1990, p. 140). According to Family Law in Rwanda and in South Sudan, property is collectively owned, and its exploitation is a matter for the family. Each household has to produce enough for its own needs and to contribute to group expenditure. Each household must have land to farm in every season, land on which to build a dwelling house. However, access to the rights of enjoyment of a family asset is gained by way of inheritance. Division is made within

the family according to the wishes of the deceased, not necessarily with a view to equality as between heirs. Daughters acquire no rights to immovable property (Ntampaka, 1997, p. 4; Mukangara & Koda, 1997, p. 71; Rwomire, 2001, p. 96 and Hinga et al., 2008, p. 54). The reason that daughters do not inherit immovable property from their parents is the understanding that they got married, moved away, and spent most of their lives in their husbands' families (Rwabangira, 1996, p. 25; Rwomire, 2001, p. 96). Although women had limited rights to land and other economic resources, they were engaged in agriculture, doing heavy labor to produce for their household's consumption (Rwomire, 2001, p. 95). Even though married women work hard on the land and produce harvests, they do not have control over their income, their labor productions are distributed in the large community, and it is often used to support of male prestige (Human Rights Watch, 1996; Rwomire, 2001, pp. 95–969). Traditionally and culturally, African mothers have a huge role for her child's acquisition of health, food, education and her child's positive attitude towards the social behavior (Richard Parker, 2009). Almost in African countries, agriculture is the backbone of the Rwanda and South Sudan's economy (Hinga et al., 2008, p. 93). Many rural women do not benefit from agriculture because they are deprived of the right to make decisions and they are denied the right to control income from agricultural products, especially cash crops (Mukangara & Koda, 1997, pp. 28–29; Rwomire, 2001, p. 99 and Adekunle, 2007, pp. 9–14). Thus, this reveals how some African culture and customs have given men dominant power over women (Adekunle, 2007, pp. 107–108). According to study carried out by USAID (2005) shows that many traditional practices in Rwanda are not compatible with the constitutional guarantee of the equality between women and men. Recent elections resulted in 63.8% women representatives in the Chamber of Deputies, the highest percentage in the world (United Nations, 2013). However, the research says that compared to the executive branch, the Parliament is weak. Many female parliamentarians lack the political background, training, and experience of their male colleagues. In the spirit of constitutional guarantees, the justices sector has not been adequately educated about changes in the laws to protect women's rights, or about how to achieve gender equality in practice (Devlin & Elgie, 2008).

### **Traditional Marriage in Rwanda and in South Sudan**

South Sudan is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse country in the African continent (Bubenzer & Lacey, 2013). It has a diversity of social norms and even unique livelihood on a national stage (Colantonio, 2009). Culturally marriage is considered as a union beyond the two individuals but it bonds the two families together (HRW, 2013). In some African countries, death is believed to be contagious. In the case of the husband's death, a widow's impurity is removed when she has sexual relations with the chosen heir, who is often a brother of her husband (Quinn, 2014; Rwabangira, 1996, p. 27). The act of purification with a chosen heir is not necessarily the wedding night of a new marriage. Rather, it is the physical

reaffirmation of the position of a woman married into a family. She still has the rights of a wife, not only to land, but to belong and to be respected as a woman in her home (Jackson & Karp, 1990, pp. 99–101). Whoever marries has to know that the woman does not belong to the husband only but also to the lineage (Bujo, 1998, p. 152). Like in some African societies, sometimes a Rwandese woman may marry the widow of a deceased brother even when he has another wife. This kind of marriage is called “levirate” that a man is inherited his brother’s widow (Ayisi, 1979, p. 8; Murphy, 1989, p. 86 & Rwebangira, 1996, p. 27).

In South Sudan where there are more than 64 ethnic groups, reflecting that marriage is conducted in different ways. First, marriage may happen through the choice of family, especially mothers choosing a girl for their boy (Mikaya, 2010). In which parents control marriage decisions of their sons and daughters, and organize marriage on behalf of their children (Juuk, 2012). This kind of marriage is in line with cultural norms, in which decision made by parents are strict, final and culturally binding (Kasongo, 2010). The second type of marriage, sometimes a girl is taken by force where ever she is found, especially during traditional dance, or at marketplace (Ouattara, Sen & Thomson, 1998) Thirdly, some nomadic tribes of South Sudan traditionally have a system of compensation that is giving away their own sister or daughter for killing someone during cattle raid (Shanti Risal, 2013). Traditionally South Sudanese marriage is like selling out your own daughter to another man of a different clan (Beswick, 2001). However, the ways marriages are conducted in South Sudan differ from one tribe to another based on cultural and traditional perspectives (HRW, 2013).

### **Violence against women in African societies**

In most of South Sudanese ethnic groups culturally violence against married women is seen by many to be appropriate (Jok, Leitch & Vandewint, 2004). Due to poverty, most men lose control over their families; they get frustrated and turn to drinking alcohol, which results in men physically, abuse their women (Gershowitz, 2009). Based on most of South Sudanese culture it is acceptable for a husband to discipline his wife and children. And women who are physically assaulted or raped are extremely unlikely to report it to anyone (IRC, 2012). Newly married women will try to adjust themselves to that family (Beswick, 2001). New family shapes new married girl’s minds while learning new skills, shifting relationship, the emergence of different language and ideas (Williams, R., 2011). However, addressing all forms of discrimination and violence against women should be a global demand (UNICEF, 2015).

Although divorce is legally possible in Rwanda and in South Sudan, it is difficult for a woman to obtain it. Traditionally divorce is discouraged and rare because through marriage extended family ties are created (Carbone & Brinig, 1990). Divorce means not just separation of a couple but the dissolution of bonds between members of the



extended family (Duany & Duany, 2001). Families and tribal elders will seek to deal with marital problems without resorting to divorce. This has both positive and negative consequences for the married couple (Beswick, S., 2001). With this type of culture means gender-based violence and protection violation in South Sudan are driven by a culture of silence and stigma. However, divorce procedures vary among tribes, for example, in Kakwa tribe the couples must appear before chief in a change of court, to be granted with a divorce certificate. (Keltner, & Robinson, 1996).

## **Method**

### **Sample**

A total of 761 participants participated in the study, 420 (302 females and 118 males) in South Sudan; and 341 respondents (166 males, 175 females), 50 from Finland and 291 from Belgium, participated in the study. In South Sudan, the data collection was conducted both in urban as well as in rural areas, primarily the Equatorial region that is Juba the capital city of South Sudan and Yei state, both in Central Equatoria. South Sudanese participants, some of them are married, divorced, and single. In Belgium and Finland, the respondents had come either as refugees or on other grounds after the 1994 genocide. At the time of the interview, they were staying in 13 different locations in Belgium and 14 locations in Finland. The participants were selected according to the following criteria: They had to be above 20 years of age, they should be native Rwandans; they should speak the local language, Kinyarwanda, and have a residence permit.

### **Instrument**

The data has been collected by using a paper, pencil, and questionnaire, distributed to individuals, both male, and females, including people working with government, international and national NGOs in the Republic of South Sudan. In Finland and Belgium, interviews included several parts related to experiences in 1994 genocide against Tutsis and its aftermath. In the present study, the participants were also interviewed about aggression and violence against women before and after the 1994 genocide, cultural impact in their marriages, families and at their workplaces.

### **Procedure**

The questionnaires were dispatched in 27 different locations of Finland and Belgium. Narrative interviews were conducted in local languages Kinyarwanda and French. The data were collected during 13 months in the period of 1.8.2015–30.8.2016. In South Sudan, data was collected in Juba city and Yei state, which located 100 miles South West of Juba the capital city for South Sudan State.

### **Ethical considerations**

The study adheres to the principles concerning human research ethics of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013), as well as to the guidelines

for responsible conduct of research issued by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012). The respondents were informed of the purpose and procedure of the study. They were aware of that their participation was voluntary and that no consequences would follow if they refused to participate in it.

### **Qualitative results**

Despite the apparent recognition of the positive role of education in human development, improving access to education is still difficult in many parts of South Sudan (Deng, 2003). Though the security situation remains stable in the capital city Juba, as an underdeveloped country should demonstrate and increase investments in human capital. Education should be the priority since the country is seeking to increase both economic growth and human welfare. But due to war, still there some challenges of reaching universal policies of primary education to all (Sinclair, 2001). Concerning girl's education there is gender inequality in South Sudan while in Rwanda education is acquired by all, but poverty hinders many students to continue their studies. In South Sudan, sending children to school, girls are encouraged to marry early as a result; many die during intimate partner violence. South Sudanese government should do more in education and women empowering can protect them from intimate partner violence. Respondents argue that for South Sudan to develop and have a peaceful co-existence between men and women, government should develop a system of gender equality without discrimination, but only based on humanity. The government of South Sudan should promote Gender justice and ensure that men and women enjoy the same quality of life and the same rights before the law. According to the division of labor by gender, most of respondents from South Sudan and Rwandan in Finland and in Belgium say that men should be also responsible for maintaining the household, raising children, and preparing food, trading, working in the fields, getting firewood from the forest and water from the river. While Rwandans living in Finland and Belgium enjoy some level of economic and security, living as members of a visible minority may create stress. Many Rwandan men in Finland and Belgium continue to live as they were in Rwanda, and follow their culture. Some do not help their wives like cooking, cleaning of houses, and washing of dishes, thus, their families end up by separation. In addition, some Rwandan women also forget their culture, and try to live like western women and say that now they have their own rights, they have their own Bank account and money, that nothing they need from their husbands. Some South Sudan men simply do not have the money, but others spend their money on personal needs, consuming alcohol or supporting other wives. All in all, there is a big cultural difference from people of South Sudan and people from Rwanda in Finland and Belgium, because poverty, education, and insecurity play a big role on aggression against women in South Sudan.

### **Discussion**

Though the war has ended in South Sudan, culturally women's well-being and security of their children under husbands is still under threat. Men dominance over



women is recognized in both countries, South Sudan and Rwanda. South Sudanese girls who refuse to marry a man chosen by her family is punished, beaten by relatives or put under police custody for long period without trial. This is contrary to Rwandan girl; she can be insulted, denounced from any help by her family but not put her under police custody. After the independence of South Sudan on the 11, July 2011, efforts to develop legal institutions, to promote the rule of law where introduced, but however, the respondents argue that the justice system should reflect traditional values and identities of the South Sudanese. Women and girls in South Sudan continue to be at risk of violence from cultural impact due to religious rituals. Polygamy is allowed in South Sudan while it is not allowed in Rwandan post-genocide, except in Islam or in traditional religious beliefs.

With regard to marriages, being single, especially among women, is considered strange and unacceptable in those two countries, the bride price nowadays comprises of both money and agricultural products with some few livestock. Marriage in Rwanda is a social institution that is accorded much respect and dignity but however, it is expensive, and some poor men have decided to remain singles because they cannot afford a bride price dowry (*inkwano*) and marriage party expenses. A dowry is an essential condition of validity of a marriage and of the legitimacy of children born of the union. However, it severs to the perpetuation of the power of the husband and the inequalities within the family (Ntampaka, 1997, p. 14). Some South Sudanese and Rwandan women are discouraged from seeking divorce for fear of being unable to refund the bride price (Mukangara & Koda, 1997, p. 38). However, poverty, discrimination, lack of human and legal rights, poor health conditions of South Sudanese women is widespread (Jok, 2011). South Sudanese women generally suffer from violence inflicted on them mainly by their intimate partners (Abramowitz, 1996).

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