

MA' MARA SAKIT VILLAGE

Feminist Humanitarian Network

# WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY IN SOUTH SUDAN:

## Understanding Forms of Organizing and Support Systems

**Authors**
Aluel Atem
Paula Itoo

Report Front and Back Cover Illustrations by Nyarow Agar

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# Introduction

92% of employed women in low-income countries are in informal employment and often work in the most vulnerable segments of the informal economy[1]. Women employed in the informal sector are often self-employed or working for others earning and making low wages and irregular incomes[2]. They work under largely unsafe conditions with minimal social protection, making them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, a reality that COVID-19 aggravated[3].

This reality is not any different for South Sudan. The presence of women as street vendors, perishable and vegetable sellers in food markets, care and domestic workers, subsistence farmers, and seasonal agriculture workers is notable. Women and girls' unrecognized and often unpaid or underpaid labor is undeniably an immense contribution to South Sudan's economy.

There is no sufficient data on the contribution of South Sudanese women and girls in the informal economy, the ways they are organizing or movement-building beyond the NGO sector, or, more importantly, how they form support networks that could be obtained during this research. However, some studies point to the fact that 48.6% of households in South Sudan are female-headed and shouldering the brunt of ensuring their families' and communities' survival and well-being[4].

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1 Tackling Vulnerability In The Informal Economy © OECD/ILO 2019
2 UN Women Women in Informal Economy
3 GJIA, 2022 GJIA, 2022 The State of the Informal Economy in Africa During The Covid 19 Pandemic
4 UN Volunteers 2019, Supporting the livelihoods of women in South Sudan with UNDP

On the other hand, the discussions on the fight for women's rights often tend to focus on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Faith-Based or Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), and individual activists, primarily those in the mentioned spaces, largely undermining the contribution, resistance and daily organizing of women and girls in the formal sector, communities, formal and informal learning institutions, and initiatives not necessarily registered as entities. The NGO-ization of women's organizing is perceptibly and arguably one of the main challenges the women's movement in South Sudan faces.

This report seeks to understand how women and girls in the informal sector across South Sudan organize and form support networks and highlights the impact of COVID-19 on these groups. The report intends to inform national advocacy targeting donors and government investing in recovery efforts to ensure women's leadership and inclusion. Additionally, the report seeks to inform Ma' Mara Sakit Village movement building and engagements with women and girls in the informal economies.



# Research Methodology

This research adopted qualitative research methods comprising oral and semi-structured interviews. Data were collected from seven state capitals: namely, Juba, Central Equatoria State, Torit, Eastern Equatoria State, Bor, Jonglei State, Rumbek, Lakes State, Aweil, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Wau, Western Bahr el Ghazal, and Kuajok, Warrap State. Due to limited resources for Ma' Mara Sakit Village researcher to travel to all the states, twelve states-based Research Assistants were identified in six states, two per state, to support primary data collection within their states. They were extensively prepped and worked hand in hand with Ma' Mara Sakit Village researchers throughout the three months of research. They first assessed existing women and girls' groups in the counties they could access within their states. They later conducted group interviews followed by individual women-focused interviews in different markets.

Fifty-four women and girls' groups and twenty-six individual women and girls were interviewed in seven states. All interviews were to be recorded; however, the Research Assistants in all the states expressed concerns that women and girls are often uncomfortable and hesitant to speak when being recorded. Therefore, all the Research Assistants took extensive notes during all interviews.



54

women and girls groups and **26** individual women and girls were interviewed

# Research questions

The group research questions were designed to deepen understanding of existing informal women and girls' groups. These questions focused on assessing the sizes of the groups, leadership structures, resources that enable them to function as a group and how they acquire those resources, their connections to other `groups, how they get information on policies, laws, or other significant decisions concerning women and girls or other critical national issues and more importantly how they get their voices to national decision-making processes, especially on issues affecting women and girls or other pressing national issues, and lastly, the impact of COVID-19 on their group and lessons they learned from that experience.

On the other hand, the individual research questions were designed to assess the forms of organizing, especially amongst informal women entrepreneurs in known set-up marketplaces and street vendors. The questions focused on getting insights on whether the individual women are part of any business associations, networks, or unions, how the groups they are part of are structured, the benefits of those groups to them, and lastly, the impact of COVID-19 on them and their business.  If they are not part of any groups, why?





## Data Analysis

Researchers used inductive content analysis. The data collected was categorized based on the emerging themes and a narrative developed. This was done by analyzing the content from the interviews and the experiences of the sample group. This included reading through all the data collected and looking at commonalities and differences across responses.



## Data Interpretation

Researchers focused on each question and the responses across states. The purpose of each question was reviewed, and data categorized under each theme was analyzed to draw detailed explanations and understanding of the critical points, and then conclusions were driven.

# Research Limitations

- Due to **budget constraints**, Ma' Mara Sakit Village researchers could not travel to all the states to conduct the research in person and had to rely on state-based Research Assistants. Identifying suitable Research Assistants to work with was tedious and took time.

- Even after successfully identifying twelve Research Assistants in six states, **coordinating** with all of them and ensuring they delivered what was expected was highly challenging and time-consuming. Ma' Mara Sakit Village researchers went back and forth with some Research Assistants, especially where follow-up questions were not asked to support making sense of some of the short responses offered without explanations.

- **Poor network and connectivity**, especially during group WhatsApp calls and other direct one-on-one calls while coordinating with the Research Assistants, was a significant challenge too.

- Although the plan was to conduct the research in all ten states, Ma' Mara Sakit Village could only collect data in seven states due to **time limitations**, **insecurity** in some states like Upper Nile, and the **inability to find suitable Research Assistants** within the research timeframe.

- Accessibility to other counties within the state beyond the counties the Research Assistants resided in was a challenge due to **connectivity issues**, **security concerns**, and **resources** to enable them to travel to other counties.



# Findings

**The research findings were analyzed and categorized based on the following themes:** existing forms of organizing, leadership, and structure, the resources groups have and ways in which they mobilize resources, their connections with other women or girls' groups, networks with formal and informal institutions and decision-making bodies, access to information, and the impact of Covid 19.

**Forms Of Organizing And Support Systems**



232

informal women and girls' groups were identified in seven states.

Across the seven states, women and girls in the informal sector organize along ethnic and community lines, faith-based, neighborhoods, food security/farming, business/entrepreneurship, which include merry-go-round groups locally known as "Sonduk-Sonduk Groups," unions, savings, and loans groups, and market associations. Several issue-based groups exist, especially women's groups focused on peace and security within their neighborhoods, communities, or states, disability rights, widowhood, peer mentorship, and cultural dance groups.

From the groups interviewed, most issue-based groups, especially on peace and security, are either influenced or formed with support from NGOs or Development Partners to contribute to women's empowerment and enhance their inclusion and participation in decision-making processes. Jonglei State has the highest and most organized, self-formed community-based groups for both women and girls across age groups. Eastern Equatoria has the most self-formed saving and farming women's groups, with minimum support from NGOs, donors, and development partners.

92% of individual businesswomen and girls interviewed are not part of any business association or group. However, 24% are part of other groups, mainly Sonduk-Sonduk, community, and church groups. Lack of business associations/unions/networks and lack of information on existing business associations/unions/networks was one of the main reasons many of the women and girls gave as to why they are not a part of any business group. They look for alternative ways to organize based on either service they provide or the products they sell, such as Salon Women Groups, Tea Women Groups, etc., or join other savings and loans groups to turn to when their businesses are not progressing as expected. Most of the women interviewed are part of Sonduk-Sonduk groups.





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**"Being in a group requires a lot of time and money."**

For example, in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, the women and girls who sell vegetables, peanut butter, and other items formed a group called "Muku Mith," which means, 'let us raise children.' This group has about 50 members who lead smaller groups in other markets within their state. They have a well-structured leadership in place, and the members support those whose businesses are collapsing. Other challenges included time limitations as many are self-employed, single-handedly running their small business. It takes so much time that they barely have time to commit to group activities. *"Being in a group requires a lot of time and money."* Said one of the interviewees. Foreign businesswomen cited communication difficulties as most of the groups they have seen are formed by women who at least share one local language in common.

**Groups' Structure and Leadership**

All the Fifty-Four groups interviewed have strong, democratically elected leadership. The leaders are elected to serve for an average of two to three years, with the possibility of extension depending on the group's satisfaction with the leadership. The leadership structure amongst the groups is comprised mainly of the chairperson, deputy, and finance person. A few other groups varied in form, with fewer or additional leadership roles depending on group size and purpose.

The minor groups have at least ten members, and the larger ones are up to 600 members and above. *"We do elections in our groups; girls are the only ones allowed to participate, and only the elder girl in the house can vote. But girls keep getting married, so we make an appointment until the service period ends."* One of the girls' groups shared.

The leadership carries on the core functions of the groups and keeps all members up to date. For example, the Sonduk-Sonduk groups are structured on a contribution design basis, either daily, weekly, or monthly, and the group leader performs the agreed-upon action for the contribution. This means members give their contributions on an agreed basis. The group leader, for example, ensures each member submits their contribution on time and hands it over to one of the members until every member has received their share. They also conduct routine meetings based on the groups' agreed-upon meeting frequency; otherwise, meetings are conducted on a need basis. Depending on the group size, some perform their meetings in their homes, while others use existing church and community spaces.



All the 54 groups interviewed have strong, democratically elected leadership

**"We do elections in our groups; girls are the only ones allowed to participate, and only the elder girl in the house can vote. But girls keep getting married, so we make an appointment until the service period ends."**

**Financial Resourcing**

All the groups, whether self-formed or formed because of support from NGOs and international development partners, mainly exist as support groups and forums that foster organization and easy coordination amongst themselves. Voluntary leadership is the group's primary resource. They don't require financial resources to conduct their rotational convenings; financial resources are not a core function of their existence. However, they contribute little money here and there to support their existence where financial resources are needed.

68% are self-reliant, with membership fees and monthly contributions being their primary source of financing. A few groups have additional sources of income from group activities. For example, faith-based groups get resources through activities like the dedication of children, contributions from the congregation, and selling things like the rosary, among others that supplement their contributions. Farmers' groups rely on financial resources from their produce, while others have shared land they collectively cultivate, and resources from that go directly to the group savings. Other ways in which they acquire resources are through lobbying for seeds, water pump machines, broilers, and layers from NGOs and international development partners.



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Cultural dance groups have traditional attires that they sell. They also get "appreciated" and given money when invited to events to perform. Other groups offer catering services, knit bedsheets and seat covers, rent out chairs hired during events, and beadwork, among other activities that generate resources for their groups. *"We have a store in the market for rent where many produce sellers keep their stock for sale, and after the sale, they pay us money. We hired the piece of land from the rightful owner and erected*

*the store to store our goods only. Still, later on, the idea of having something which would generate money sprung up, and this exposed us to a decision of availing space to other people as we will benefit from the cash they would give us."* Shared one women's group. The groups that conduct activities that supplement their membership fees and monthly contributions expressed interest in learning more entrepreneurial skills.

32% of the groups depend on other income sources, including bride prices when girls are married, funds from NGOs or international development partners, contributions from well-wishers, and private donations. They still collect membership and monthly fees; however, unlike the other groups, this is not their primary source of financing.



**"We have a store in the market for rent where many produce sellers keep their stock for sale, and after the sale, they pay us money. We hired the piece of land from the rightful owner and erected the store to store our goods only. Still, later on, the idea of having something which would generate money sprung up, and this exposed us to a decision of availing space to other people as we will benefit from the cash they would give us."**

### Networks and Solidarity with Other Women and Girls Groups

All the groups interviewed are aware of other women and girls' groups; however, no major cross-group networks and solidarity exist; they mainly connect with similar groups. For example, the Sonduk-Sonduk groups, common support groups for women in South Sudan, are not actively associated with other groups apart from other Sonduk-Sonduk groups. In Eastern Equatoria State, the Sonduk-Sonduk groups, for example, invite other Sonduk-Sonduk groups to witness their annual opening, which is celebrated. Cultural dance groups are connected to other cultural dance groups as they often perform together at events. Faith-based groups are connected to other faith-based groups and similarly with community girls' and women's groups.

### Networks with Formal and Informal Institutions and Decision-Making Bodies

Despite how well-structured these groups are, most of them operate independently. 51% of the groups interviewed have no networks with formal institutions and decision-making bodies, especially the government. The other 49% are connected through different networks and associations they are part of. Faith-based and community women and girls' groups are directly linked to other community decision-making bodies, such as the churches/mosques they are part of and general community associations. Still, they are not directly linked to formal government decision-making bodies.



The few groups that are part of State Women's Associations or Unions access government bodies like the state-based Ministry of Gender, Child, and Social Welfare, local government, office of the mayor, state legislative assembly, and police through those associations. On the other hand, market associations/networks and trade unions have some links to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment. Issue-based groups, especially those focused on peace and security, formed with support from NGOs or international development partners, are well connected to national and international NGOs and other development partners that often conduct training, workshops, or consultation processes through which their voices are added to state and national issues.

Sonduk-Sonduk groups, on the other hand, are the groups seem disconnected the most from different groups and formal and informal institutions and decision-making bodies. All the Sonduk-Sonduk groups interviewed across the seven states also don't have direct links to legal, financial institutions such as investment, retail, or commercial banks. Only one group is connected to another women's loans group.



51%

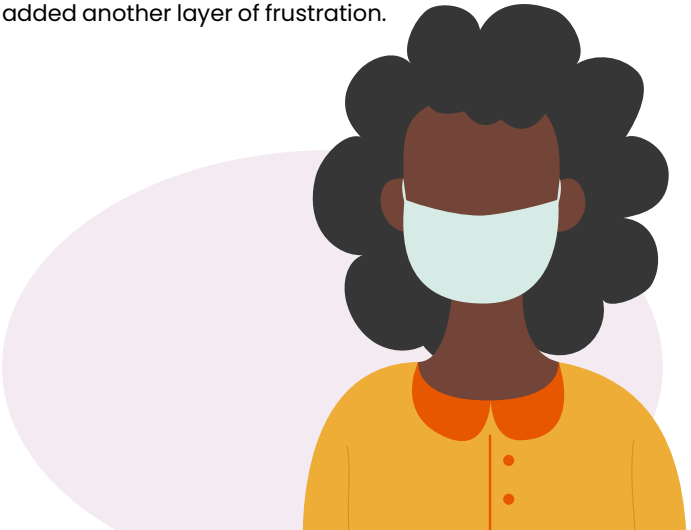
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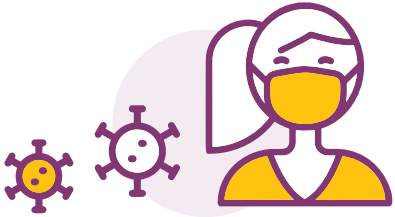
**Access to Information**

Community-women and girls' groups heavily depend on chiefs and other traditional leaders as their primary sources of information, community gatherings, general community associations, and customary courts. On the other hand, faith-based groups rely on the churches/ mosques through which they get information on state or national developments, but not specifically on issues concerning women and girls. Groups with access to NGOs and international development partners also access information through these institutions that facilitate seminars, meetings, and workshops to share any developments, especially on issues affecting women and girls. Traditional and multi-media also came up as channels through which information is accessed, especially mobile public announcements, radio, and social media.

**Impact of Covid-19**

The pandemic heavily impacted women and girls in the informal economy, individually or in a group. With businesses shut down, shops and offices closed, women and girls in tea and small restaurant businesses automatically ran out of business. Agricultural activities were interrupted, and those who bought goods from the neighboring countries lacked access to re-stock, among many other challenges they experienced. Without group members performing their daily activities, Sonduk-Sonduk contributions went down, and some groups closed without some group members receiving their shares of contributions leaving many with nowhere else to turn for financial support. Some women shared that sexual and gender-based violence increased, especially domestic violence and sexual exploitation and abuse of girls. Many of these women are the breadwinners for their families, which added another layer of frustration.





In efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 by the government and all other actors, most of these women and girls' groups were discriminated against.

It's important to note that the formation of these groups is deeply rooted in pre-existing relationships and social ties. These groups are among these women and girls' most effective support systems. Some groups foster daily, weekly, or monthly engagements, which are spaces and opportunities to share work-related and personal struggles. For some of these women, struggle is a daily reality, and sometimes faith or the ability to believe in something and be able to commune with other women who share their faith is all that carries them through the day—another support system that COVID-19 restricted, which profoundly affected faith-based women groups.

In efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 by the government and all other actors, most of these women and girls' groups were discriminated against. Most groups hardly met because they did not have wash points at their various places and other protective items like facemasks because their groups locally engage in the community and are not legally recognized or mostly meet in their homes hence did not receive things like soaps, sanitizers, and masks which were being distributed to designated community places, especially by NGOs and development partners. Something they could have benefited from if they were recognized bodies.

**Key Lessons They Learned From COVID-19**

- Groups that survived or generated income from just one activity or provision of just one service learned to diversify their activities or services. One cultural dance group that mainly generates income from performing at events and gathering shared that they learned not to depend solely on dance and to diversify their activities to cope with unforeseen circumstances.

- The importance of digital media literacy, accessibility, and affordability. While the world quickly adapted to other means of virtual engagements, this was not a reality for most women and girls in the informal economy.

- Increase personal and group savings through formal financial institutions to support them during unexpected challenges. *"House saving is unreliable because once you are broke today, immediately you rush to take the cash at hand."* said one interviewee.

- Flexibility and adaptability. COVID-19 at first felt like something minor and short-term. Many groups underestimated how deadly and widespread the virus would get. Accepting reality enabled them to think outside the box; some produced reusable masks, reduced their meeting quorum requirement, and directed customers to come by their gardens and homes to buy vegetables and other food items instead of going to marketplaces, among others.

- Building networks with other institutions and groups, especially women's rights organizations and other institutions that provide training and workshops on various entrepreneurial and basic psychosocial skills.

**"House saving is unreliable because once you are broke today, immediately you rush to take the cash at hand."**

- Girls and young women also learned that their lives, well-being, hopes, and dreams are equally in jeopardy in emergencies. *"We have learned that being without school can make us get married fast; our parents don't want to keep us in school but want us to get married."* Said one of the interviewees from a girls' community group.

- Lastly, The groups also appreciated the improved hygiene and sanitation in their communities because of COVID-19. They intend to maintain some of these practices for the well-being of their communities.

**"We have learned that being without school can make us get married fast; our parents don't want to keep us in school but want us to get married."**

# Conclusions and Recommendations

## 1 Recognition and Legitimization of Informal Women and Girls' Groups.

There are multiple creative ways women and girls organize, mobilize, and coordinate themselves and contribute solutions to issues affecting them in different communities across South Sudan. They do not need to be "restructured," or should any restructuring be needed; this must come from the respective groups and not external actors, for these groups have ways they sustain themselves that best work for them. They must be recognized or considered legitimate women and girls' groups and engaged as stakeholders in community, state, and national decision-making processes by all actors.

## 2 Women And Girls in the Informal Economy are the Central Pillars of the Feminist Movement in South Sudan.

Only 19% of the female population is literate in South Sudan[5]. This means most women and girls are operating in the informal economy, bearing the brunt of all forms of insecurities, and breaking patriarchal norms from different fronts. While the work of NGOs especially women-led and women's rights organizations are valuable, they must act as facilitators and support systems of women's organizing and movement-building in South Sudan, not at the forefront of the movement. These bodies must lead from behind and have women and girls in the informal economy carrying this country on their backs lead and drive the change they need to see in South Sudan. A South Sudan that works for the most marginalized groups of women and girls will work for all women and girls.

5 South Sudan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022

## 3 Increase Networks and Direct Communication Channels Between Formal Women-Led and Women-Focused Institutions and Informal Women and Girls' Groups.



Critical mass is fundamental for any movement. Formal women-led or focused institutions such as NGOs, enterprises, and academia, among other vital actors, often have better access to resources, networks, and connections to state, national, and international decision-making bodies, among other privileges, all of which they can powerfully leverage to foster movement-building and better hold accountable government and development partners invested in advancing gender equality and women's rights in South Sudan.

## 4 Invest in Women and Girls-Focused Social Safety Net Programs



Global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic only exasperate pre-existing inequalities and conditions of marginalized groups, especially women and girls. NGOs, government, donors, and development partners in South Sudan must invest in sustainable social safety net programs that are women and girls focused through the already existing support systems different groups of women and girls have in place. Strengthening informal women and girls' support groups by providing them with the necessary knowledge, skills, and other resources to function and self-sustain in the long run.

## 5 More research to Design and Extend Evidence-Based Support to Women and Girls in the Informal Economy



Minimal data exist on women's and girls' experiences in South Sudan. More comprehensive and sector-specific research needs to be done to understand fully the conditions under which women and girls in the informal economy in South Sudan operate, the challenges they experience, and opportunities that exist that can be built on, especially with a focus on knowledge and skills gaps that can enhance their safety, security, productivity, and benefits in ways that fully humanize them and the vital role they play in the country.

## 6 Invest in Civic Freedoms and Enhance the Civic Space



The government of South Sudan needs to allow and facilitate processes that will enable the formation and establishment of more functional and effective general business associations, networks, and trade unions, specifically women's business associations, networks, and trade unions. Women and girls are forming independent support and business groups because there are few structured trade unions and business associations or networks through which they can collectively discuss challenges affecting them within their sectors and voice their concerns through the proper channels without fear of repercussions.

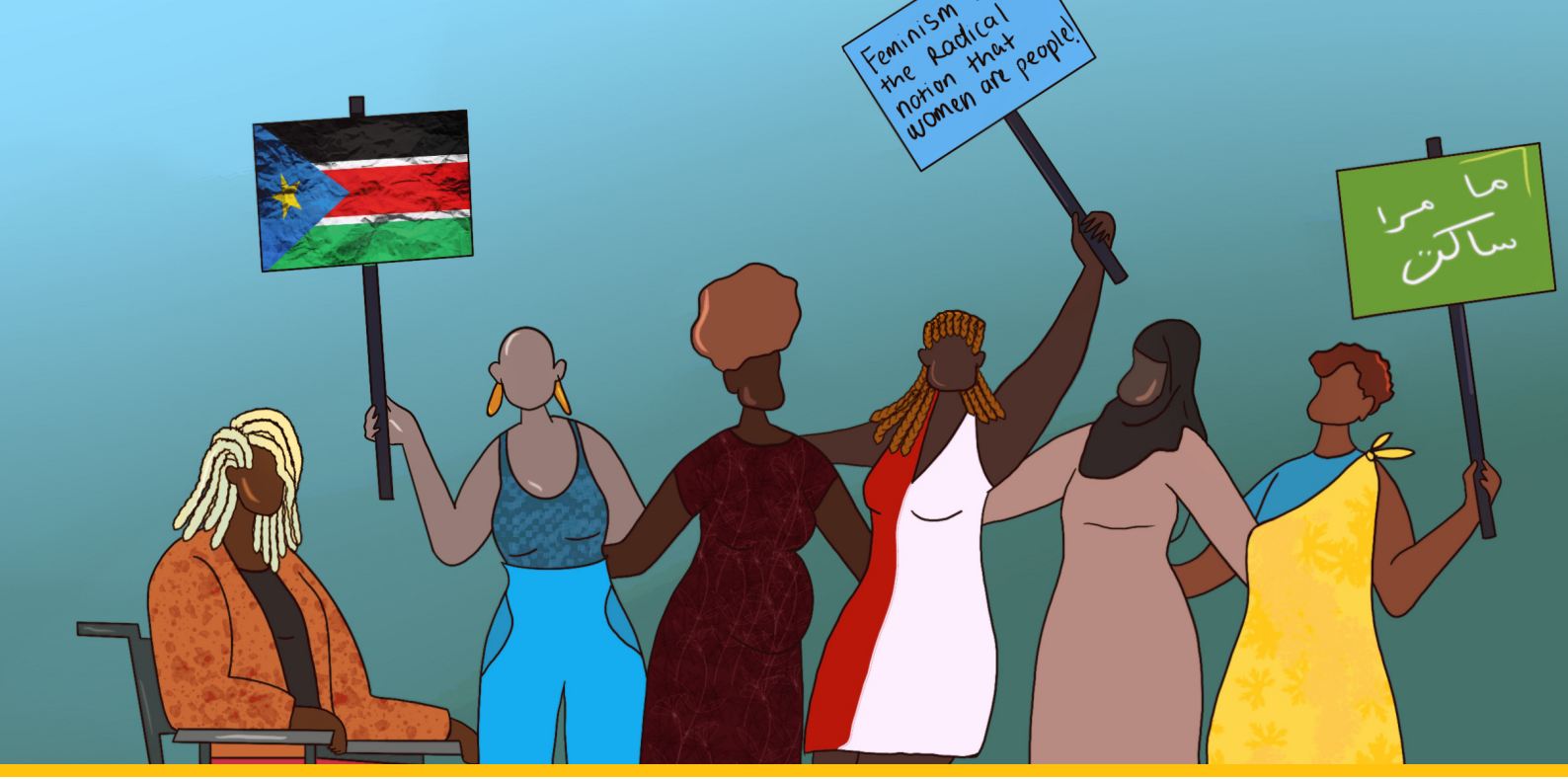
**A South Sudan that works for the most marginalized groups of women and girls will work for all women and girls.**

## About Ma' Mara Sakit Village

Ma'Mara Sakit Village is a feminist community that amplifies voices and creates platforms and opportunities to facilitate processes that contribute to the attainment of individual and collective agency using research, art, culture, and multimedia.

www.mamarasakitvillage.org

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