

‘Threatening Mini Skirts’ or ‘Agents of Development’: Returnee Southern Sudanese Women and their Contributions to Development

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Return migration, be it in the after-math of conflicts, social, economic or political insecurity or in search of better livelihood options, is often depicted as beneficial to the migrants as well as their communities of origin. However, forced displacement and migration often imply dramatic gendered and generational changes both for the migrants and those who stay behind. Hence, ‘return’ is often to a place that migrants have little or no knowledge or experience of. Conceptualising war-time displacement as a catalyst of social change, this paper explores the processes and impact of the return of the displaced southern Sudanese Nuer women in the aftermath of the recent wars (1983-2005). It focuses in particular on the contributions that returnee girls and women bring to the communities in the place of origin. Based on ethnographic research in Kenya and southern Sudan, this paper examines the gendered after-return emplacement experiences of women in southern Sudan’s. The paper will focus on two main questions. First, it will consider the local meanings of development examined through the eyes of Nuer women and men, both stayees and returnees. The concepts of ‘home’ and ‘development’ as imagined, lived and (re)produced are of key importance in the continuing shaping and re-shaping of gender identities, ideologies and institutions. Second, the paper will discuss the perceptions of and actual contributions that returnee women and girls make to their communities after return. In the context of after return emplacement, some returnee women and girls are perceived as agents of development bringing education, valued ‘foreign’ experiences and knowledge. At the same time, their attempts at greater autonomy, freedoms and gender equality are often judged as threatening for the local gender order. In this way, the paper aims to elaborate on the impact on social relations, gender categories and identity politics that migration and its processes of return carry with them. It will demonstrate how gender (and age) are constraining concepts for women (and men), and how potential development contributions of returnees vary for women and men.

