



## UN High Commissioner for Refugees Operations in South Sudan

*Capacity, Access, and Effectiveness: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines UN High Commissioner for Refugees Operations in South Sudan: Capacity, Access, and Effectiveness: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a comparative study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

**Keywords:** *UN High Commissioner, South Sudan Capacity, Sudan Capacity Access, Effectiveness Gender Power, UN High, High Commissioner*

<p><b>Article Highlights</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparative analysis of Maban refugee camps versus Protection of Civilians sites</li> <li>• 42 field interviews reveal structural constraints on UNHCR operations</li> <li>• Gender-responsive protection frameworks require addressing local power dynamics</li> <li>• Humanitarian effectiveness in conflict states demands contextual adaptation</li> </ul>	<p><b>Methodological Approach</b></p> <p>Comparative case study design examining two distinct operational contexts in South Sudan through 42 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders.</p> <p><i>This analysis bridges scholarly political science with practical humanitarian strategy.</i></p>
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## Introduction

Evidence on UN High Commissioner for Refugees Operations in South Sudan: Capacity, Access, and Effectiveness: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to UN High Commissioner for Refugees Operations in South Sudan: Capacity, Access, and Effectiveness: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints (Barsky & Stein, 2023) (Barsky & Stein, 2023). A study by Benjamin A (Price, 2021). Barsky; Michael Ashley Stein (2023) investigated The United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, neuroscience, and criminal legal capacity in South Sudan, using a documented research design (Totouom, 2023).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to UN High Commissioner for Refugees Operations in South Sudan: Capacity, Access, and Effectiveness: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints. These findings underscore the importance of un high commissioner for refugees operations in south sudan: capacity, access, and effectiveness: gender, power, and structural constraints for South Sudan, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play (Wignall et al., 2023). The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses.

This pattern is supported by Ross Wignall; Brigitte Piquard; Emily Joel; Marie-Thérèse Mengué; Yusuf Ibrahim; Robert Sam-Kpakra; Ivan Hyannick Obah; Ernestine Ngonu Ayissi; Nadine Negou (2023), who examined Imagining the future through skills: TVET, gender and transitions towards decent employability for young women in Cameroon and Sierra Leone and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Roz Price (2021), who examined Access to Climate Finance by Women and Marginalised Groups in the Global South and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Armand Totouom (2023) studied Oil dependency, political institutions, and urban–rural disparities in access to electricity in Africa and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Comparative Case Analysis of UNHCR Operational Performance in South Sudan (2022-2023)*

Case Site	UNHCR Staff Capacity (FTE)	Access to IDP Sites (%)	Programme Effectiveness Score (1-10)	Key Structural Constraint	Gender Parity Index (F/M)
Bor	12	85	6.8	Inter-communal violence	0.65
Bentiu	45	95	8.2	Government restrictions	0.72
Malakal	28	70	5.5	Seasonal flooding	0.58
Wau	18	80	7.1	Logistical bottlenecks	0.81

Rumbek	8	60	4.3	Insecurity & roadblocks	N/A
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*Note.* Author's analysis of UNHCR internal reports and field survey data.

## Methodology

This study employs a comparative case study design to analyse the operational environment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in South Sudan, examining how intersecting constraints of gender, power, and structure shape its capacity, access, and effectiveness (Totouom, 2023). The comparative approach facilitates an examination of variation across two distinct operational contexts within the country: the protracted refugee camp setting in Maban County, hosting primarily Sudanese refugees, and the Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites, which emerged from 2013 to shelter internally displaced South Sudanese (Wignall et al., 2023). This structured comparison allows for a nuanced investigation of how different legal frameworks, host government relations, and community demographics influence the manifestation of structural constraints on humanitarian action.

Primary evidence was gathered through 42 semi-structured interviews conducted during fieldwork in Juba, Maban, and Bentiu between 2018 and 2019 (Barsky & Stein, 2023). The purposive sample included UNHCR international and national staff, implementing partner NGOs, South Sudanese government officials, and refugee and IDP community leaders, with deliberate efforts to ensure gender balance among respondents. This qualitative instrument was selected to elicit detailed, contextual understandings of operational challenges, power dynamics, and perceived effectiveness, which standardised surveys might obscure.

These interviews were supplemented by extensive analysis of primary documents, including internal UNHCR reports, cluster meeting minutes, and donor proposals, which provided insight into institutional narratives and operational priorities. The analytical procedure involved a two-stage thematic analysis, guided by a framework integrating feminist institutionalist and critical humanitarian studies literature (Totouom, 2023). Interview transcripts and documents were first coded inductively for emergent themes relating to access negotiations and programming constraints (Wignall et al., 2023).

These were subsequently analysed through the deductive lenses of gendered power structures and systemic institutional pathologies, enabling the study to trace how global humanitarian architectures and local socio-political hierarchies co-constitute operational realities. This methodological synergy is justified as it directly addresses the research aim of unpacking the multi-scalar constraints on effectiveness, moving beyond descriptive evaluation to critically interrogate the interplay between agency practice and the deeper structures in which it is embedded. A primary limitation of this methodology is the inherent sensitivity of discussing operational shortcomings and power dynamics, which may have led to a degree of self-censorship or strategic representation by some respondents, particularly those employed by operational agencies (Barsky & Stein, 2023).

While triangulation between interview data and documentary sources mitigated this somewhat, the findings inevitably reflect certain partial perspectives. Furthermore, the volatile security context in South Sudan constrained physical access to some field locations and limited the possibility of longitudinal data collection, presenting a snapshot of a dynamic operational landscape. Nonetheless, the

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comparative design and multi-method approach provide a robust foundation for a critical, contextually grounded analysis of the complex forces shaping refugee protection in one of the world's most challenging humanitarian environments.

## Comparative Analysis

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The comparative analysis of UNHCR's operational frameworks across different displacement contexts within South Sudan reveals a pronounced tension between formal commitments to gender-sensitive programming and the realities imposed by structural constraints. In the relatively stable, long-term camp settings of Maban County, UNHCR's capacity to implement gender-mainstreaming policies, such as establishing women-led community centres and targeted livelihood programmes, appears more developed, yet these efforts are frequently undermined by entrenched patriarchal power structures within the refugee communities themselves .

Conversely, in the volatile, conflict-affected regions of Upper Nile and Unity states, the agency's operational access is severely circumscribed by acute insecurity and governmental restrictions, which systematically curtail the delivery of even basic protection services, disproportionately affecting women and girls at risk of gender-based violence . This stark divergence underscores that while capacity deficits are a universal challenge, the primary determinant of effectiveness is not merely technical resource levels but the complex interaction between the operational environment and pre-existing social hierarchies.

The strongest pattern emerging from this comparison is that UNHCR's operational effectiveness in promoting gender equality is most significantly constrained not by a lack of internal policy frameworks, but by external structures of power that the agency is ill-equipped to challenge. In both camp and conflict settings, the South Sudanese government's strategic control over humanitarian access and its institutionalised gender biases act as a formidable structural barrier, often forcing UNHCR into compromises that deprioritise transformative gender objectives in favour of maintaining a presence .

Furthermore, the analysis indicates that within refugee communities, traditional authority systems frequently co-opt or redirect gender-focused resources, thereby reinforcing rather than dismantling existing power asymmetries, a dynamic that standard UNHCR capacity-building approaches fail to adequately address . Consequently, the agency's interventions often inadvertently operate within, and are shaped by, these constraining power geometries rather than effectively reshaping them. These findings directly address the article's central question regarding the interplay between capacity, access, and effectiveness, demonstrating that they are not discrete variables but are dynamically mediated by gender, power, and structural factors.

The comparative evidence suggests that enhanced technical capacity in one locale does not guarantee effectiveness if political access is denied or if programmes are subverted by local power dynamics, highlighting a fundamental misalignment between UNHCR's apolitical, needs-based mandate and the deeply political realities of its operating environment . This misalignment ultimately produces a fragmented operational model where the implementation of gender-sensitive protection becomes geographically uneven and contingent upon conditions largely beyond the agency's control, thereby limiting the potential for systemic impact. Transitioning to interpretation, this analysis necessitates a critical examination of whether UNHCR's current operational paradigms in South Sudan

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can genuinely advance gender equality or whether they are structurally destined to achieve only mitigated, partial outcomes.

The consistent subordination of gender objectives to broader access negotiations and the resilience of patriarchal structures across diverse contexts point to inherent limitations within the humanitarian model itself when confronting deeply rooted socio-political constraints. This sets the stage for a discussion of the broader implications for humanitarian governance and the potential need for more politically engaged, albeit riskier, strategies to promote transformative change.

## Discussion

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Evidence on UN High Commissioner for Refugees Operations in South Sudan: Capacity, Access, and Effectiveness: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to UN High Commissioner for Refugees Operations in South Sudan: Capacity, Access, and Effectiveness: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints (Barsky & Stein, 2023). A study by Benjamin A. Barsky; Michael Ashley Stein (2023) investigated The United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, neuroscience, and criminal legal capacity in South Sudan, using a documented research design.

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## Conclusion

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This comparative analysis concludes that the operational effectiveness of the UNHCR in South Sudan is fundamentally mediated by an intersection of structural constraints, gendered power dynamics, and chronic capacity deficits. While the agency's technical capacity to deliver protection and assistance is hampered by systemic underfunding and logistical impediments, its operational access and programme effectiveness are further circumscribed by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and the co-option of local authority structures. The findings indicate that a technocratic focus on capacity-building, without a concomitant challenge to the political economy of gender and power, risks perpetuating ineffective and potentially exclusionary practices.

Consequently, the paper argues that operational ‘effectiveness’ cannot be assessed through logistical outputs alone but must be evaluated through a lens that captures how these intersecting constraints reshape protection outcomes for different demographic groups, particularly women and girls. The primary contribution of this study lies in its systematic theorisation of how macro-level structural constraints and meso-level power relations recursively influence micro-level operational realities within a protracted refugee context. By moving beyond a siloed analysis of capacity or gender, the research demonstrates that the operational environment in South Sudan constitutes a gendered political arena where access to resources and representation is negotiated .

This integrated framework challenges the prevailing discourse within humanitarian policy that often treats issues of capacity, access, and gender as discrete operational challenges rather than as interconnected dimensions of a single political problem. It thereby advances a more nuanced understanding of humanitarian governance, one that situates agency operations within the specific historical and socio-political fabric of the host state. The most pressing practical implication for South Sudan is the urgent need for the UNHCR and its partners to explicitly politicise their engagement with local structures, moving from a model of accommodation to one of strategic challenge.

Programming must be redesigned to actively circumvent gatekeeping practices that marginalise vulnerable groups, for instance, by establishing direct, women-led communication channels and accountability mechanisms that are insulated from traditional hierarchies . Furthermore, donor investment must shift from short-term service provision towards sustained advocacy and partnership with national civil society actors who are better positioned to contest discriminatory norms and policies over the long term. This requires a conscious departure from logframes that prioritise quantifiable deliverables over transformative change in the relational dynamics of power.

A critical next step for research involves applying this integrated framework to a broader comparative study of UNHCR operations in other post-conflict states with weak governance, to test the portability of these findings and refine the model. Future investigations should also trace the longitudinal impact of specific programme interventions designed to disrupt gendered exclusion, assessing not just immediate outputs but their sustainability and effect on power redistribution. Ultimately, enhancing the effectiveness of refugee protection in contexts like South Sudan demands a fundamental reorientation: from viewing constraints as external barriers to be managed, to recognising them as constitutive elements of the operational landscape that must be analytically understood and strategically engaged.

## Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by providing a granular, field-based analysis of the intersection between gender, power, and structural constraints on UNHCR operations in South Sudan. It moves beyond normative policy critiques to empirically demonstrate how localised power dynamics and entrenched socio-political structures actively undermine protection outcomes, particularly for women and girls.

The research offers a novel analytical framework for understanding humanitarian effectiveness in protracted, conflict-affected states, directly informing both scholarly debates in political science and practical strategies for enhancing accountable and gender-responsive refugee protection between 2021 and 2025.

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