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Governing Protection, Constructing Security: UNMISS in South Sudan

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Abstract

This thesis, informed by feminist security studies, decolonial theory, and governmentality, critically examines how women's security is discursively conceptualized, governed, and operationalized within the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). It argues that UNMISS protection regimes do not merely respond to pre-existing insecurity, but actively construct women's security through gendered, colonial, and governmental logics. While simultaneously claims to advance protection while reproducing narrow terms of recognizability, dependency, and epistemic marginalization. In doing so, the thesis contributes to broader debates on peacekeeping, gender governance, and the colonial dimensions of gendered security and peacekeeping by illuminating how women's security in the context of South Sudan is not only a matter of protection, but also a site of governance through which power, knowledge, and intervention are organized and legitimized.

Key words: United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), South Sudan, women's security, peacekeeping, security governance, feminist security studies, governmentality

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List of Abbreviations

CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CRSV	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
FSS	Feminist Security Studies
IGO	Intergovernmental Organization
PoC	Protection of Civilians Organization
SPLM/A	South Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SGBV	Sexual Gender-Based Violence
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
UNMIS	United Nations Mission in the Sudan
UNMISS HRD	United Nations Mission in South Sudan Human Rights Division
UNPKO	United Nations Peacekeeping Operations

1. Introduction

The experience of individuals is not the central concern of traditional security studies, especially in the Cold War era (Olonisakin et al., 2016, p. 3). Security discourse answered to events and narratives of that era, thus primarily centering the state and its defense (Olonisakin et al., 2016, p. 3). As a result, the security and safety of individuals were marginally considered, and gender equality to a considerably lesser degree (Olonisakin et al., 2016, p. 3). Yet, scholars such as Wibben (2009, p. 85) contend that peace and security are not gender-neutral concepts. Instead, they are shaped by broader social and political systems of hierarchy through which gender, and its intersection with race, class, and sexuality, systematically structure whose insecurity is marginalized and who is considered a target of protection (Scheyer and Kumskova, 2023, p. 239). In this sense, the traditional approaches to international relations (IR) and security governance have evolved through systems of dominance, where security is understood through militarism and state-centered logics (Scheyer and Kumskova, 2023, p. 238–239). Whereas, peace is reduced to the absence of war and violence (Scheyer and Kumskova, 2023, p. 238–239). It is against this backdrop that war and intervention may be regarded as the most extreme expression of relations among societies in the world (Hagemann, 2020). Achieving peace and security by the means of intervention has long been a well-tested experiment, and one that has not lost its appeal among international power holders (Hagemann, 2020). This is especially evident in the aftermath of the Cold War, where the frequency in which the United Nations, alongside other international actors, intervened in war-torn and fragile states increased markedly (Hänggi, 2005, p. 10).

Within this broader security governance rational, the United Nations emerges as a central institution for addressing global peace and security issues by providing the most universal structures through which to do so (Hänggi, 2005, p. 10 Hinmikaiye, 2026, p. 2317). However, these interventions were largely prompted by the threat these states posed to the regional stability or by the scale of the humanitarian crises generated by intrastate conflict (Hänggi, 2005, p. 10; Gowan, 2018, p. 434). In this context, traditional peacekeeping proved insufficient in addressing these new security challenges, leading to peace operations becoming increasingly multidimensional, and complex, as peacekeeping was expanded to include the broader task of post-conflict peacebuilding (Hänggi, 2005, p. 10). While the objective of these peacekeeping missions

have been to maintain international peace and to respond to humanitarian crises, their result have been inconsistent, fueling debates on UN peacekeeping as an instrument for global security governance (Chinagorom et al., 2025, p. 492).

These tensions are particularly pronounced in South Sudan, where violence has persisted despite the presence of one of the UN's largest peacekeeping operations, United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) (Ibreck, 2024, p. 62; Chinagorom et al., 2025, p. 492). This is likewise where UNMISS provides a significant case on the examination of how security, governance and peacekeeping are institutionalized in practice (Ibreck, 2024, p. 62; Chinagorom et al., 2025, p. 492). The independence of South Sudan was constructed as an ambitious statebuilding project, despite the warning signs of persisting and deep-rooted internal fractures caused by episodic intercommunal conflict, and two civil wars (Ibreck, 2024, p. 65; Russo, 2025, p. 45). However, South Sudan descended into civil war only two years following its independence due to a power struggle between President Kiir and the vice President Riek Machar (Paddon Rhoads, 2019, pp. 290–291; Russo, 2025, p. 45). Despite being equipped with “one of the strongest protection and human rights mandate in peacekeeping history”, UNMISS was unable to contain the political crisis or the escalating mass violence (Paddon Rhoads, 2019, p. 291; Russo, 2025, p. 45). As an international peacekeeping mission, UNMISS constitutes the only United Nations operation explicitly mandated to protecting civilians within its own bases (Ibreck, 2024, p. 62). Established under resolution 1996 and acting under Chapter VII under the UN Charter, the mission hold extensive quasi-governmental authority (Ibreck, 2024, p. 62). This governmental authority is significant in the context of the Protection of Civilian sites (PoC), when UNMISS assumed additional operational responsibilities that extended its original mandate, namely, to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual violence (UN Peacekeeping, 2021; Ibreck, 2024, p. 62). In 2014, the mission's mandate explicitly incorporated gender-related protection commitments by coupling its security governance discourse by mandating “specific protection of women and children,” as well as the monitoring and reporting of sexual and gender-based violence (Reeves, 2012, p. 352; Ibreck, 2024, p. 62). In 2016, the mandate was further reinforced through an explicit commitment to deter and prevent all forms of sexual and gender-based violence (Ibreck, 2024, p. 65).

As such, these debates illustrate the need for closer attention on how women's security is governed within UN-led peacekeeping operations and interventions, rather than treating it as supplementary to security politics. As Olonisakin et al. (2016, pp. 1–2, 8) and Reeves (2012, pp. 348–353) demonstrate the way gender inequality still remains within the margins of the international security agenda, however, once it is incorporated into UN peacekeeping, it is translated into institutional practices such as gender mainstreaming, monitoring, and reporting. In the context of South Sudan, Hagemann (2021, pp. 458–503) contends that intervention not only operates through multiple and shifting logics, but they further produce new forms of authority. Against this background, UNMISS provides a particularly significant site for examining how women's security is constructed and governed as an object of international peacekeeping intervention in South Sudan.

1.1 Thesis Outline

This thesis is structured into five main chapters. Following the introduction, chapter two provides the contextual background of this thesis by outlining the conflict in South Sudan, women's insecurity, humanitarian situation, and the development of UNMISS. Chapter three outlines the previous research and theoretical framework. Chapter four presents the methodological approach, which includes the research design, case selection, empirical material and operationalization of the study. Chapter five presents the analytical core of the thesis. Lastly, the concluding chapter summarizes the main findings and reflects on their broader implications in relation to the two research questions and the broader field of international security and governance.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

The point of departure of this thesis is to critically examine how women's security is discursively constructed, governed, and operationalized within the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), drawing on a theoretical framework comprising of feminist security studies, decolonial theory and governmentality. To achieve these objectives, this thesis employs a Critical Discourse Analysis to examine UNMISS related mandates, operational strategies, and gender frameworks. In doing so, it examines women's security as an object of governance through UN institutional practices and particular forms of knowledge and expertise. Given the strictly critical

disposition of this thesis, UNMISS as an international peacekeeping mission, is not treated as a neutral response to insecurity, but as a form of governance which is deeply structured by gendered and colonial power relations (Reeves, 2012; Narayanaswamy, 2024b). These analytical concerns are further reflected in the following research questions, which guide the analytical focus of this study:

- 1) How is women's security constructed, governed, and operationalized within the UNMISS-led humanitarian and peacekeeping intervention in South Sudan?
- 2) Whose knowledge, expertise, and priorities shape UNMISS protection approaches to women's security, and which forms of knowledge are marginalized or excluded?

2. Background

2.1 The conflict of South Sudan

In 2011, South Sudan gained its political independence from the Republic of the Sudan, the culmination of a process which was set in motion with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the government of Sudan in 2005 (de Coning and Felix Da Costa, 2015, pp. 830–831). Preceding its independence, the northern and southern part of Sudan witnessed a protracted conflict related to power relations over exclusionary politics, resulting in the death of two million people, four million internally displaced and approximately 600 000 refugees (Pokoo and Serebour, 2016, p. 127). Amidst this situation, South Sudan entered independence faced with the challenge of balancing competing internal and external interests concerning peacebuilding and state building (Pokoo and Serebour, 2016, p. 127). However, two year after gaining independence, on December 2013, South Sudan descended into civil war (Onor and Ndulue, 2026, p. 181). The primary driving force of the political crisis and mass violence was “elite political competition and ethnic mobilization” of a rival leadership faction within political party Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in an attempted size of power (Jok, 2021, p. 36; Onor and Ndulue, 2026, p. 181). The SPLM/A emerged in the 1980s as a liberation movement with simultaneously

political and military mandates, led South Sudan's independence struggle, and thereafter became the ruling party in 2011 (Pokoo and Serebour, 2016, p. 129). The SPLM/A was characterized by internal factionalism, rebellion, and unresolved political divisions, including disagreements over the movement's long-term vision and the structure of South Sudan (Pokoo and Antwi Serebour, 2016, p. 129; Russo, 2025, p. 45).

As such, these tensions were made particularly visible in the split between President Salva Kiir and the former Vice President Riek Machar, while weak implementation of past peace agreements meant that internal disputes within the SPLM/A resulted in mass violence and nationwide insecurity (Pokoo and Serebour, 2016, p. 129). While the political conflict turned war was not originally founded on ethnic identity, it nonetheless overlapped with preexisting ethnic and political indictments when soldiers from President Silva Kiir majority Dirka tribe conflicted with those from the Nuer tribe, a tribe in which the Vice President Riek Machar belongs to (UNICEF, 2013; Afriyie et al., 2020, p. 34). Thereby, triggering armed conflict and targeted genocide within the capital of Juba that further spread throughout the nation (Afriyie et al., 2020, p. 34).

2.1.1 A Humanitarian Crisis and the Effect on Women's Insecurity

The conflict in South Sudan not only generated mass violence and large-scale displacement, but has further exacerbated existing development and humanitarian challenges (Afriyie et al., 2020, p. 34; UNHCR, 2026). Alongside the armed conflict, the country has faced a humanitarian landscape characterized, worsening food insecurity, extreme events of climate change shocks and economic instability, with renewed conflict and intercommunal violence, particularly in regions such as Unity and Upper Nile, further displaced and victimized humanitarian access (Afriyie, Jisong and Yaw Appiah, 2020, p. 34; OCHA, 2025; UNHCR, 2026). The humanitarian response following the outbreak of conflict has been shaped by multiple constraints, including restricted access to affected populations, overcrowding within the Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites, inadequate financial and human resources, and continued flooding (UN Women, 2024). The humanitarian operations have largely centered on the PoC sites located on UN bases, which at the time housed approximately 63,000 displaced individuals (OCHA, 2014; Nyadera, 2018, p. 62; UN Women, 2024). In contrast, displacement sites outside the PoCs left approximately 120,000 displaced

people with limited access to basic lifesaving and protection services (OCHA, 2014; UN Women, 2024).

The onset of conflict has further revealed how women and girls are disproportionately affected not only by armed violence, but also by economic crisis and natural disasters (UN Women, 2024). These insecurities have intensified their exposure to protection and health risks, as well as to trafficking and early and forced marriage as strategies for survival (Ellsberg et al., 2020a, p. 2; UN Women, 2024). Women and girls in South Sudan continue to suffer some of the highest levels of physical and sexual violence in the world (Ellsberg et al., 2020, p. 2), a pattern further underscored by the report of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan (UNCHRSS) (2022, p. 3). The report highlights extensive forms of oppression, including “targeted killings, rape and sexual violence, slavery, forced marriage, forced procreation, forced labour, and other forms of sexual violence and inequality” (UNHRC, 2022, p. 3). The UNCHRSS notes that the conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls in South Sudan cannot be understood as separate from the wider structures of violence in which it is embedded (UNHRC, 2022, p. 3). As such, the violence within these conditions of insecurity, is therefore shaped by conflict, the erosion of social and legal protections, and political, economic, and social inequalities (UNHRC, 2022, p. 3). In this sense, sexual violence emerges within an environment where different forms of violence and discrimination already structure women’s everyday life, as well as in the context of armed conflict (UNHRC, 2022, p. 3). The relenting and extensive violence committed against South Sudanese women and girls can therefore be understood as part of a continuum of violence, in which the violence is systematic and structural (UNHRC, 2022, p. 3).

2.2 The United Nations Mission in South Sudan

The United Nations Mission In South Sudan (UNMISS) constitutes among the largest and most expensive peacekeeping missions within the UN structure, with “one of the strongest protection and human rights mandates in peacekeeping history” (Paddon Rhoads, 2019, p. 291; Ibreck, 2024, p. 65). UNMISS is the successor mission to the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS), which was established in 2005 to support and monitor the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation

Movement/Army (SPLM/A) (de Coning and Felix Da Costa, 2015, pp. 830–831; Hansen, 2015, p. 743). As UNMIS concluded its mandate on 8 July 2011, UNMISS was established the following day, as a result of the independence of South Sudan (UNMIS, 2011; de Coning and Felix Da Costa, 2015, p. 831). UNMISS was formally mandated under Security Council Resolution 1996, for an initial period of one year, to primarily “support the government of South Sudan in the consolidation of peace and security, including in conflict prevention, mitigation, and resolution, and in the protection of civilians” (UN RES1996, para. 1; de Coning and Felix Da Costa, 2015, p. 831). Since its inception, UNMISS has been renewed on a yearly basis, with its latest renewal being formally establish on 30 April 2026 under resolution 2820 (de Coning and Felix Da Costa, 2015; S/RES/2820).

The onset of civil war in December 2013, did not merely result in mass violence across the nation, but also in a large-scale displacement which lead to approximately 45,000 people seeking protection either within or near UNMISS bases (de Coning and Felix Da Costa, 2015, p. 831; Russo, 2025, p. 45; Onor and Ndulue, 2026, p. 181). The new demands on UNMISS in the context of civilian protection, resulted in the opening of the UN compounds to civilians seeking shelter from the violence (Murphy, 2017a, pp. 368–369). Thus, creating protection of civilians (PoC) sites across South Sudan (Murphy, 2017a, pp. 368–369). Subsequently, in early 2014, under resolution 2155, the Security Council reprioritized UNMISS’ mandate “towards the protection of civilians, human rights monitoring and support for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and increased the mission’s troop strength” (Murphy, 2017a, pp. 368–369). Thereby, the mission officially entered “uncharted legal and operational waters for United Nations peacekeeping”, presenting a peacekeeping mission which was simultaneously a political and strategical novelty (Hagemann, 2021, p. 505).

UNMISS is among the first peacekeeping missions within the UN to hold an explicit mandate to protect women from conflict-related and gender-based sexual violence (Ibreck, 2024, p. 62). The mission has a “quasi-governmental responsibility to “halt the unrelenting tide of violence against women and girls in the PoC sites” (Ibreck, 2024, p. 65). In 2014, its mandate was expanded to include the specific protection for women and children, as well as monitoring and reporting on sexual and gender-based violence, and was further reinforced in 2016 (Ibreck, 2024, p. 65). UNMISS further comprises of a dedicated Gender section, as the impact of conflict is known to

disproportionately affect women, as well as girls (Ellsberg et al., 2020, p. 2; UNMISS, 2025). The UNMISS' Gender Section was established to "support the implementation of various United Nations Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security and lead efforts to strengthen women's full, equal, meaningful and safe participation in all areas, and at all levels, of decision-making in South Sudan" (UNMISS, 2025). Support for women's protection, is according to UNMISS (2025), provided through Gender and Women Protection Advisers, who engage in active intervention, facilitate access to services for survivors of sexual violence, and strengthen local capacity. This protection further extends to women-led organizations, peacebuilders, and human rights defenders from threats and reprisals, while working to ensure a safe environment in which they can carry out their activities (UNMISS, 2025).

3. Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

The following chapter outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework of the present thesis, drawing together feminist security studies (FSS), decolonial theory, and governmentality. These theories form the conceptual foundation of this thesis, by providing distinct analytical tools for examining various aspects of the research questions. Feminist security studies provides the lens through which this study interrogates whose security counts, whose is prioritized, and how particular forms of intervention are rendered legitimate. By moving beyond conventional state-centric understandings of security, it becomes possible to examine not only what is recognized as a security issue, but also to whom security is extended in practice (Sjoberg, 2009, p. 198, 2018, p. 46; Wibben, 2009, p. 85). In this study, that expansion makes it possible to analyse how UNMISS actively constructs women's security in South Sudan through specific gendered assumptions and intervention logics, rather than merely responding to pre-existing threats. Women's security is therefore not approached as a neutral category, but as one shaped by gendered hierarchies of representation and protection. Yet while FSS is well suited to exposing these gendered dynamics, it offers more limited tools for analysing how they are entangled with colonial power relations, which makes a decolonial perspective necessary. (Sjoberg, 2018, p. 46), as well as how UNMISS positions women as subjects of protection. While decolonial theory enables the analysis to examine the ways in which colonial powers and epistemic hierarchies underpin, shape and legitimize the United Nations humanitarian interventions and peacekeeping operations (Roepstorff and Maitra, 2025, pp. 30, 44). In addition, governmentality provides the conceptual vocabulary to illuminate

how institutions such as UNMISS do not simply respond to pre-existing insecurity but actively produce women's security as an actionable and institutionally recognizable object of governance (Reeves, 2012, pp. 350–351). Governmentality as a theoretical framework in this thesis seeks to contribute to answering the how questions at the center of this study: how women's security is rendered governable through particular governmental rationalities and techniques, and how these make it possible to govern women's security particular ways.

Furthermore, Foucault's understanding of governmentality traces the emergence of modern governmental rationalities primarily through Western European history (Stoler, 1995; Jaeger, 2023). In this regard, the risks must be acknowledged that such a perspective projects Western and Eurocentric forms of power as universally applicable models of governance (Stoler, 1995; Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2019; Jaeger, 2023). Especially as Foucault positions colonialism as external to, rather than constitutive of, liberal and humanitarian rationalities (Stoler, 1995; Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2019; Jaeger, 2023). Against this backdrop, this thesis therefore aims to employ governmentality through a decolonial lens, addressing what scholars such as Jaeger (2023, pp. 74–75) denotes as a critical gap in international governmentality studies. Namely the absence of adequate theorizing of the ways colonial power relations shape knowledge production, as well as the process through which colonial power relations produce representations of some populations as deficient, justifying external governance (Jaeger, 2023, pp. 74–75).

3.1 Feminist Security Studies

3.1.1 Feminist Challenges to Traditional IR

Feminist scholars have for long been persistent on the centrality of gender in understanding issues of global politics and security, prompting scholars such as Cynthia Enloe to ask the famous question of “where are the women?” (Quek, 2023, p. 108). Such a question not only underscores the “profound neglect of gender as framework for analysis in traditional international relations approaches”, but highlights the inadequacy of the dominant androcentric perspectives for accounting for the real-world dynamics that render women and gender issues invisible (Peterson, 1992, p. 197; Quek, 2023, p. 108). As a result, much of feminists scholarship in International Relations (IR) focus on illuminating the structural reasons as to why women's “participation, and

knowledge about achieving peace and security” remain largely within the margins or taken less seriously by the international community (Tickner, 2019, p. 16). However, the fundamental assumptions of IR and security Studies reflect a deeply gendered logic, as both disciplines are heavily influenced by realist and neorealist traditions (Tickner, 2004, p. 44). Within (neo)realism, attributes such as power, autonomy, self-reliance, and rationality are understood as desirable forms of state behavior, in so far as they are understood to enable state to survive and prosper in a dangerous ‘anarchical’ international system (Tickner, 2004, p. 44). Thus, IR feminists proceed from the conviction that a truly inclusive security remains unattainable so long as unequal power structures of gender, race, and class persist (Sjoberg, 2018, p. 46; Tickner, 2019, p. 16). Thus, expanding beyond the conventional frameworks and assumptions of security studies by applying a gender lenses to international security to illuminate that which has been rendered invisible (Sjoberg, 2018, p. 46; Tickner, 2019, p. 16).

3.1.2 Feminist Security Studies (FSS)

While feminist interventions in security studies began with directing their analytical attention towards women and their roles within international politics, it is important acknowledge that gender rather than women “tends to be the broader concern of FSS scholarship” (Quek, 2023, p. 109–110). Gender in Feminist Security Studies (FSS) is not understood as the equivalent of membership in biological sex classes, rather it is “system of symbolic meaning that creates social hierarchies based on perceived associations with masculine and feminine characteristics” (Sjoberg, 2009, p. 187). Gender can thus be conceptualized as a set of norms, expectations, and behaviors which are socially constructed and learned, and thereby inseparable from relations of power as it operates as a system producing social inequalities (Quek, 2023, p. 110). Through this distinction, the gendered social hierarchy is established as simultaneously a social construction and a structural feature of both social and political life that fundamentally shapes individuals’ positions within, and perceptions of, the world (Sjoberg, 2009, p. 187; Quek, 2023, p. 110). In this way, gender encompasses the traits attributed to individuals based on their perceived sex, commonly conceptualized as masculinities and femininities, which operate not as fixed biological categories but as flexible and context-dependent classifications (Sjoberg, 2018, p. 46). These gendered traits are, however, not confined to the level of individual interaction but operate “everywhere else

across the global that tropes, perceptions, and labels that we might identify as ‘gendered’ exist” (Sjoberg, 2018, p. 46).

In this light, the central ambition of FSS is to therefore to demonstrate how essential gender is in shaping structures and interactions of the world, while simultaneously showing the inadequacy of the perspectives that fail to take gender into account (Quek, 2023, p. 110). As such, FSS occupies a unique role within IR, simultaneously being part of a broader intellectual tradition examining security in expansive terms such personal safety, economic stability, and physical well-being, as well as in more conventional form including war, terrorism, and conflict (Sjoberg, 2018, p. 47). Like much of the feminist scholarship in IR, FSS critically engage and reject the predominant disciplinary confines of traditional security studies at various degrees (Wibben, 2014, p. 744). This critique is rooted in a fundamental rejection of neo-realism and realism, which have long served as the dominant intellectual frameworks guiding both academic inquiry and policy practice (Shepherd, 2009, pp. 215–216). Within these approaches, key actors such as states, militaries, and international organizations, as well as concepts such as diplomacy and warfare, are often represented in gender-neutral terms (Detraz, 2013, p. 7; Quek, 2023, p. 111). As a result, women and gender are rendered largely invisible within international politics (Wibben, 2009, pp. 85, 89; Sjoberg, 2018, p. 48). Therein, simultaneously obscuring the normative and empirical concern of FSS scholars: the gender-hierarchical international system (Wibben, 2009, pp. 85, 89; Sjoberg, 2018, p. 48). In response to these traditional claims of gender-neutrality, FSS insists that the disregard of gender hierarchies “gives inaccurate and incomplete explanations of how global politics works follows from the understanding that gender hierarchy is prevalent in global politics”, as gender is constitutive of political identities and interactions which shape both actors and outcomes within international politics (Sjoberg, 2018, p. 48–49).

Scholarship within FSS maintain the necessity of the reconceptualization of security beyond that of state and the top down approaches that are distinct to IR (Quek, 2023, p. 113). In contrast, FSS employ a bottom-up approach rooted in the recognition that “the security of the state is often built on the insecurity of its most vulnerable populations” (Quek, 2023, p. 113). This broadened conceptualization of (in)security likewise illustrates that what constitutes threats to security may provide “broader paths to tempering security threats, especially by recognizing the importance of foregrounding values associated with femininities” (Sjoberg, 2018, p. 49). Such a

reconceptualization makes visible the significant interconnections between the insecurities experienced by women at the everyday level and those at the macro level of global security, underscoring women's security not as a consequence of national violence but as a "fixture of women's everyday lives in the form of gendered violence" (Quek, 2023, p. 113). This in turn emphasizes the way in which gender is intrinsically embedded within the structures and processes of global politics (Sjoberg, 2009b, pp. 199–200).

The understanding of gender as embedded within international security is reflected in what Sjoberg (2018, p. 46) identifies as a shared central commitment within FSS. Gender is understood as "constitutively interwoven in international processes at almost every step of political interaction, and should be treated as both multi-faceted and embedded" (Sjoberg, (2018, p. 49). Building on this, Shepherd (2016, p. 263) argues that the shared commitment manifests differently across FSS scholarly orientations. While some scholars center the life experiences of women in the context of security politics and practices, others engage with FSS as a series of critical investigations into how the category of gender itself "come(s) to have meaning in the world through security politics and practices" (Shepherd, 2016, p. 263). However, while both orientations converge on the view that the influence of gender in global security is widespread and deeply embedded, they notably diverge in how they theorize the nature of that embeddedness and locate its underlying sources (Sjoberg, 2018, p. 49). What unites them is that omitting gender from security studies does not render such work gender-neutral, rather, it makes it incomplete and exclusionary (Sjoberg, 2018, p. 51). From this perspective, FSS does not position itself as merely another paradigmatic alternative alongside realism or constructivism, but rather as a fundamental critique of security studies as a whole, seeking not simply the inclusion of gender as a variable or perspective, but the transformation of the discipline itself (Sjoberg, 2018, p. 51).

3.1.3 Gendered Security

From a feminist perspective, peace and security are understood in broad and multidimensional terms that include the elimination of social hierarchies producing political and economic injustice (True, 2009, p. 42). Rather than privileging militarized notions of order, this perspective centers the insecurities experienced by individuals, particularly marginalized and disempowered

populations, and treats military security as fundamentally in tension with individual security, especially for vulnerable groups. In this view, the emphasis on “defense” helps legitimize a militarized social order in which violence by both state and non-state actors is valorized (True, 2009, p. 42). The centrality of gender to international relations therefore extends to the structures and concepts that constitute world politics, revealing how the core ideals of global security, as well as the processes and institutions of international relations, are themselves gendered and reliant on hierarchies of power and divisions of violence (Runyan, 2018, p. 82; Quek, 2023, p. 111).

This is illustrated by the contradiction inherent in states’ pursuit of security, particularly in the form of militarized action and armed conflict, which, “as a form of masculine violence sanctioned by states, is shown by feminist to increase women’s vulnerability” (Quek, 2023, p. 115). While women and civilians more generally suffer higher levels of insecurities both during and after conflict, the justification for war has long been centered on the “protection of women, children, and other vulnerable groups” (Tickner, 2019, p. 18). Building on this argument, Wibben (2009, p. 86) contends that women in the context of (in)security are frequently associated with an idealized notion of inherent peacefulness or constructed as victims in need of resecure and protection. These dominant frameworks rely on hierarchical and gendered dichotomies between protector and protected, which frequently position women in the same category as children, namely as “the vulnerable potential victims whose defense and rescue help to motivate or even legitimate military interventions” (Wibben, 2009, p. 86; Otto and Heathcote, 2014, p. 1; Runyan, 2018, p. 82). Within such frameworks, the relationship between protector and protected resemble what Wibben (2009, p. 86) describes as a protection racket, in which those protected lose autonomy and become dependent on protectors who define both the nature of the threat and the appropriate response. In doing so, protection may simultaneously operate as a form of control that limits agency and, in cases of failure, may expose those supposedly protected to further violence (Wibben, 2009, p. 86).

This dynamic becomes problematic when gendered division of violence are reproduced through reduced understandings of gendered harm, particularly when gender and sexual violence are absorbed into frameworks of violence against women (Sjoberg, 2016; Runyan, 2018, p. 105). This particular framing speaks to a form of sex essentialism that depicts women primarily as victims (Baaz and Stern, 2013; Runyan, 2018, p. 82). This further risks misrepresenting such violence as

a governable phenomenon that is manageable through international policy, punishment, and protection mechanisms, rather than as embedded within the broader disorganization and violent logics of war itself (Baaz and Stern, 2013; Runyan, 2018, p. 82). In addition, the predominant response to the increasing securitization of sexual violence in conflict, has frequently been reduced to “protect women” in wartime, thus increasing the regulatory and punitive scope of already powerful international actors while leaving the inequalities and injustices that enable such violence fundamentally unaddressed (Runyan, 2018, p. 105). As Otto and Heathcote (2014, p. 1) note, this gendered schema, which relies heavily on the rationale of protecting women and advancing “women’s rights,” is frequently mobilized to explain and justify peacekeeping interventions and broader forms of international engagement in post-conflict reconstruction.

Feminist security studies provides the analytical lens through which this study interrogates the gendered relations and structures of international security. By moving beyond state-centric understandings of security, it becomes possible to examine not only what is recognized as a security issue, but also whose insecurity is rendered visible and to whom protection is extended in practice (Sjoberg, 2009, p. 198, 2018, pp. 46–49; Quek, 2023, p. 113). In the context of this study, this analytical expansion makes it possible to examine how women’s security in South Sudan is shaped through gendered hierarchies of representation and protection, rather than approached as a neutral category (Wibben, 2009, p. 86; Runyan, 2018, p. 82). It further enables an analysis of how UNMISS operates through specific gendered assumptions and intervention logics that shape how women’s security is understood and acted upon (Otto and Heathcote, 2014, p. 1; Wibben, 2009, p. 86). However, while FSS is best suited to exposing these gendered dynamics within the context of this thesis, its analytical tools are limited for examining how such dynamics are entangled with colonial power relations, which makes a decolonial perspective necessary.

3.2 Decolonial Theory

The far-reaching historical, social, and cultural ramifications of colonialism has left an indelible mark on the world (Sagar, 2021, p. 1). Despite the formal dismantling of the political colonialism across the Americas, Asia, and Africa, its structural legacies remain (Quijano, 2007, pp. 168–169). Central to the persisting colonial structure of power is the classification of populations along racial,

ethnic, and national lines, which were produced through Eurocentric domination and legitimized as objective and scientific (Quijano, 2007, pp. 168–169). According to Quijano (2007, pp. 168–169), legacy still persists in the contemporary global distribution of power and resources, where the most “exploited, the dominated, the discriminated against, are the members of the ‘races’, ‘ethnies’, or ‘nations’ into which the colonized populations, were categorized in the formative process of that world power, from the conquest of America and onward”. Thus, it is from this recognition that the contemporary world order remains asymmetrical, sustained by the colonial matrix of power as well as by pedagogies and epistemologies that perpetuate rather than challenge modern power structures, that postcolonial and decolonial approaches have emerged (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 11).

It is against this backdrop that decolonial scholarship presents an analytical scope which extends beyond the endogenous European origins of modernity, “in favour of arguments that suggest the necessity of considering the emergence of the modern world in the broader histories of colonialism, empire, and enslavement” (Bhambra, 2014, p. 115). Building on postcolonial scholarship, decolonial thought extends the decolonizing historical narratives by not only restoring visibility to the suppressed voices and agency of colonized peoples but also demanding a more radical reimagining of colonial legacies and challenges to the Eurocentric knowledge structures (Sagar, 2021, p. 2). This translates into decentering the predominant Western discourses and knowledge structure that have maintained the colonial hierarchies, biases, and omissions, and further foregrounds the marginalized and alternative epistemologies (Sagar, 2021, p. 2). Central to this epistemic decentering is Walter Mignolo's concept of the colonial matrix of power (CMP), which operates as an epistemic framework which classifies ways of knowing by combining the rhetoric of modernity, which encompasses notions of progress, development, and growth, with the logic of coloniality, illustrated in the enduring realities of poverty, inequality, and epistemic marginalization (Mignolo, 2009, p. 161; Bhambra, 2014, p. 119; Viramontes, 2022, p. 46). In this sense, the conceptions of modernity and coloniality do not operate separable, as the colonial matrix of power reveals them as inextricably connected, making it central to any meaningful engagement with contemporary global inequalities and the historical basis of their emergence (Bhambra, 2021, p. 119).

In Quijano's formulation, the epistemic framework of CMP rests on two interrelated assumptions, the conceptual separation between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge, as well as the conception of society as a macro-historical actor progressing along a linear trajectory of universal history (Quijano, 2000; Viramontes, 2022, p. 46). In this sense, the colonial matrix of power "manifests itself in the dissemination of a hierarchy of knowledges (*jerarquía de saberes*) that has objectivism and 'modern linear thinking'" (Viramontes, 2022, p. 46). Consequently, the hierarchy of knowledge produced by the colonial matrix of power positions the rationalities of modern Western science as the most appropriate mode of producing truth, effectively marginalizing alternative epistemologies as inferior or illegitimate (Viramontes, 2022, p. 46; Hassan and Sajjad, 2023, p. 27). Critically however, Viramontes (2022, p. 47) argues that the colonial epistemic framework does not merely identify pre-existing forms of knowledge but actively constitutes knowledge itself through normative criteria. Through this distinction, the hierarchy of knowledges simultaneously governs the rules of dialogue and the exchange between the multiple way of producing truth (Viramontes, 2022, p. 47). Therefore, it is this normative and constitutive dimension of the CMP which makes it analytically significant for decolonial thought, as it reveals the "emulative standard of knowledge production that underlies attempts to isolate science from non-science and that emphasizes objectivism and modern linear thinking as defining features of the former" (Viramontes, 2022, p. 46–47). As such, the decolonial effort of resisting and dismantling these hierarchies entails not simply the inclusion of marginalized knowledges but a fundamental challenge to the underlying criteria through which the value of knowledge is assessed, promoting instead a comprehensive and inclusive dialogue among diverse epistemological traditions (Viramontes, 2022, p. 47).

Extending the arguments of both Quijano and Mignolo, Lugones (2010, p. 742) argues for the "modern, colonial, gender system as a lens through which to theorize further the oppressive logic of colonial modernity, its use of hierarchical dichotomies and categorical logic". This effectively illustrates how coloniality operates simultaneously through racial hierarchies and the active production of gendered constructions, rendering the colonized and racialized women invisible within both theoretical frameworks and political consideration (Bhambra, 2021, p. 119). Drawing on Lugones' considerations (2010), Bhambra (2021, p. 119) establishes a point of convergence with Spivak's foundational work 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', making explicit the "issue of

listening and learning from others in any development away from current dominant structures of knowledge production”. Moreover, central to Lugones contribution is her foregrounding of coalitions of resistance and coalitions of understanding as necessary responses to intersecting hierarchies of oppression (Lugones, 2010, pp. 748–758; Bhambra, 2021, p. 119). Thus, establishing that knowledge production is always embedded within and shaped by the communities through which individuals come to know and theorize the world (Lugones, 2010, pp. 748–758; Bhambra, 2021, p. 119). As such, this collective and community embedded understanding of knowledge production is not incidental to decolonial scholarship but constitutive of it, as decolonial thinkers consistently draw on the intellectual traditions, historical antecedents, and scholarly communities that sustained their work (Bhambra, 2014, p. 119). As such, decolonial thought is analytically indispensable for examining whose knowledge is authorized, whose is marginalized, and how these hierarchies are sustained within dominant frameworks of global governance and international security (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011; Bhambra, 2021; Sagar, 2021; Viramontes, 2022).

3.2.1 Decolonial Approaches to International Relations

The analytical contribution of decolonial approaches to IR rests on a wide range of scholarly work that has established a profound coloniality of the discipline, arguing that it emulates the asymmetrical power relations reflected in the global order, which are shaped by the enduring legacies of colonialism (Sen, 2023, pp. 339–340). As a discipline, IR has predominantly been Western and Eurocentric in scope, centering around the workings of European international order, the uprise of the United States and the Cold War (Gruffydd Jones, 2006, pp. 2–12; Acharya, 2014, p. 648). Decolonial scholarship demonstrates how the dominant conceptions, narratives, and methodologies that constitute IR, remain too deeply embedded within the intellectual traditions, historical narratives, and agency claims of the West (Acharya, 2014, p. 649; Sen, 2023, p. 340). Seen in this light, the decolonialization of IR thus implies dismantling the protracted colonial legacy of IR, by reimagining the disciplinary architecture which “accounts for and remedies the ways in which this legacy continually shapes the intellectual priorities and the related materiality of IR” (Sen, 2023, p. 341). Moreover, when applied in a disciplinary context, this comes to involve scholarly and institutional norms, traditions, and practices that aim to meaningfully engage with

and represent the perspectives of the past, present and future of peoples that have been deprioritized and marginalized within IR (Sen, 2023, p. 341).

Jones (2006, p. 26), argues that decolonization is not a matter of reversing the political structures of colonial rule or substituting one form of Western dominance for another, requiring instead what Bhabra (2021, p. 119) describes as a fundamental epistemic reorientation through which non-Western histories and intellectual traditions are recognized as autonomous and foundational, and capable of generating alternative frameworks for understanding the encounters and entanglements that colonial modernity produced. Given that IR's intellectual architecture is grounded in the assumption that the Eurocentric ways of knowing/knowledge making carries a universal validity, the discipline's foundational frameworks remain unable to account for the plurality of experiences and ways of knowing that the colonial modernity has rendered invisible (Taylor, 2012, p. 387; Blaney and Tickner, 2017, pp. 298–302; Reiter, 2018, p. 7; Sen, 2023, p. 342). As such, the decolonial interrogation of IR's epistemological foundations finds its most productively conceptualized through the concept of the pluriverse, which functions not merely as a philosophical alternative to universalism but as a fundamental challenge to the colonial knowledge hierarchies through which IR has historically produced and legitimized its claims about world politics (Escobar, 2018; Reiter, 2018, p. 1; Viramontes, 2022, p. 48). This signals the centrality of such framework within decolonial thought for transcending Eurocentric epistemological boundaries (Viramontes, 2022, p. 48–49).

By linking knowledge with colonial power, pluriversalism accounts for multiple human experiences which go beyond the framework of modernity/coloniality, challenging the pursuit of universalism as fundamentally at odds with diversity and pluralism (Mignolo, 2011; Viramontes, 2022, p. 48). The questioning of universalism therefore leads scholars to reconsider whether knowledge in International Relations should seek the discovery of objective and universal truths about world politics (Viramontes, 2022, p. 49). Further resulting in the critique of the problematic nature of objective knowledge as it reproduces colonial knowledge by presenting it as a set of self-evident truths, according to Viramontes (2022, p. 50). The critique of objectivism is therefore central to decolonial thinking within IR, which interrogates the presumptions of a natural observing position capable of producing universal laws (Viramontes, 2022, p. 50). Such critique

is further analytically significant as it reveals how claims of objectivity in IR functions not as a neutral epistemic stance but as a mechanism through which particular, historically situated, and colonial knowledge claims are universalized and rendered beyond contestation (Viramontes, 2022, p. 50).

Another dimension of epistemic decolonization within IR must therefore occur at the conceptual level itself (Sen, 2023, p. 342). According to Sen (2023, p. 342), IR is constituted through a conceptual vocabulary that serves as the foundational cornerstones through which the discipline constructs and legitimizes its core theoretical claims about the workings of the world. Moreover, if coloniality shapes the discipline's foundational purpose, this conceptual vocabulary both reflects and reproduces a scholarly validation of colonialism and imperialism (Sen, 2023, p. 342). This in turn is clearly illustrated through the concept of sovereignty as it “describes the mainstream understanding of state sovereignty that has relied on ontological and cosmological assumptions particular to a Eurocentric genealogy”, while failing to systematically engage genealogies of sovereignty grounded in other parts of the world (Parasram, 2023, pp. 355–257; Sen, 2023, p. 342). Parasram (2023, pp. 355–357) identifies this assumption as actively colonial, as it “willfully marginalizes (and stigmatizes) other ways of being and governing in the global order” (Sen, 2023, p. 342–343). In conclusion, Parasram (2023, pp. 356–357) claims that the decolonization of IR is only possible when the discipline moves beyond its commitment to universalist conceptions toward a genuinely pluriverse understanding of the global order (Sen, 2023, p. 343).

3.2.1 Decolonial Approaches to Humanitarian Intervention and Peacekeeping

The international humanitarian system has attracted sustained critical attention within humanitarian scholarship, with decolonial scholars increasingly demonstrating that its practices and structures not only bear the marks of colonial legacies but actively perpetuate the unequal power relations between those affected by humanitarian crises and those who claim the authority to respond to them (Aloudat and Khan, 2022, p. 1; Roepstorff and Maitra, 2025, p. 30). These unequal relations of power are further reinforced by the current sites of international humanitarian action, as the contemporary humanitarian system fails to recognize the burden of history and impact on agency among the affected populations (Roepstorff and Maitra, 2025, p. 30). From this

colonial inheritance, Narayanaswamy (2024, p. 5) identifies two analytically significant and interrelated dimensions through which racial hierarchy operates within humanitarian action. The first dimension concerns the persistence of racial hierarchies within humanitarian and development spaces, which produces specific and enduring challenges for populations of color, including the logics of anti-blackness and the racialization of certain religions as inherently prone to violence (Narayanaswamy, 2024a, p. 5). The second dimension concerns the invisibilization of whiteness as the unmarked norm through which hierarchies of race operate and are sustained, a dynamic that renders the racial foundations of humanitarian governance structurally invisible and therefore analytically resistant to challenge (Narayanaswamy, 2024, p. 5). Collectively, these two dimensions reveal that racial hierarchy within the international humanitarian system functions through mechanisms of normalization and invisibilization, through which whiteness is simultaneously placed at the apex of humanitarian authority while its structural foundations are rendered beyond scrutiny and challenge (Narayanaswamy, 2024, p. 5; Pallister-Wilkins, 2021, p. 98).

In response to the inadequate attempts to address the underlying logics through which racial hierarchies are produced and sustained within the humanitarian system (Pallister-Wilkins, 2021, p. 98), decolonial scholars have argued for a “foundation shift in both power and resources, grown out of concerns that the current international aid system is part of a colonial construct that operates on Western terms and from Western points of view, perpetuating power imbalances between the global North and global South” (Roepstorff and Maitra, 2025, p. 33). While calls for structural transformation within the humanitarian sector have gained considerable momentum, the challenge of addressing the colonial foundations of humanitarian intervention extends far beyond the practices of individual organizations, pointing instead to a systemic and sector-wide problem (Roepstorff and Maitra, 2025, p. 30). In the same vein, Aloudat and Khan (2022, p. 4) contend that a decolonial approach to humanitarianism requires a fundamental reorientation of its foundational assumptions and operational logics. This entails “moving away from a Eurocentric and white savior framings of humanitarian intervention, view humanitarianism functions as separate from the geopolitical hegemony of the Global North, move away from the pretense of “apolitical” humanitarianism”, which, as decolonial scholars contend, is itself a political position that accepts

the status quo and delegitimizes any challenge to the existing world order (Aloudat and Khan, 2022, p. 4)

It further demands that humanitarian action be explicitly linked to broader struggles for social justice, including anti-racism, decoloniality, and climate justice, while fundamentally shifting the locus of decision-making authority away from international actors and toward the Indigenous and local humanitarian actors who bear the primary burden of crisis response, with the international community repositioned as a provider of technical assistance and resources rather than as the primary architect of humanitarian solutions (Aloudat and Khan, 2022, p. 4). Critically, decolonial approaches attempt to move beyond the universalized and racialized conception of the human that underpins the international humanitarian system, yet “the tensions around who is accorded a full humanity and the racial hierarchies that result are not magically erased through a change of ontological lens that opens up a consideration of relations between human and non-human actors” (Pallister-Wilkins, 2021, p. 104). Such approaches frequently ignore race as a constitutive category when thinking about the parameters of humanity, suggesting that the decolonization of humanitarianism requires not merely a reconfiguration of ontological frameworks but a sustained interrogation of the racial and colonial foundations through which the humanitarian subject is constituted, governed, and rendered knowable (Pallister-Wilkins, 2021, p. 104).

The decolonial framework presented in this thesis further equips this thesis to ask whose knowledge and expertise underwrites the discursive constructions of women’s security in South Sudan, and whose knowledge remains in the margins. Given that the intellectual architecture of IR is founded on Eurocentric ways of knowing, a decolonial perspective therefore provides the tools necessary to interrogate the colonial foundations of UNMISS governance (Taylor, 2012, p. 387; Blaney and Tickner, 2017, pp. 298–302; Reiter, 2018, p. 7; Sen, 2023, p. 342).

3.3 Governmentality Theory

3.3.1 Government as the ‘Conduct of Conduct’

The Foucauldian definition of government by the phrase “conduct of conduct”, plays on the multiple senses of the word ‘conduct’, referring to the attempts to influence behavior in accordance

with certain sets of norms and for varying outcomes (Dean, 2010). In this context, government may be conceptualized as a “calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through the desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs of various actors” (Dean, 2010). From the standpoint of the governing agent, human behavior or conduct is understood as something to be regulated, controlled, shaped, and directed towards certain objectives (Dean, 2010). As such, the notion of government as the ‘conduct of conduct’ ultimately involves an effort to deliberate on and to direct human conduct, as underlined by Dean (2010). Government as the ‘conduct of conduct’ is therefore not merely a matter of shaping behavior from above, but depends on rendering populations knowable and visible as objects of intervention (Dean, 2010). As de Larrinaga and Doucet (2010, p. 6) illustrate that it is through the development of specific forms of knowledge such as statistics, that population increasingly becomes the legible as a field of governmental intervention, enabling authorities to “think, reflect, and calculate the problem of government outside the juridical framework of sovereignty” in relation to the health, welfare, and conduct of those it governs.

3.3.2 Governmentality and its Conceptual Foundations

The term governmentality, today a prominent keyword in the lexicon of critical thought, was coined by Michel Foucault as part of his multi-faceted challenge to the way we think about power in modern societies (Walter and Tazzioli, 2023, p. 1). As noted by Larner and Walters (2004, pp. 1–2), the term governmentality seeks to capture a historical shift in how power is understood, rationalized and exercised. Governmentality may be understood as both an analytical framework and a historically specific form of power (Busse and Hamilton, 2021, pp. 4–5). As an analytical perspective governmentality seeks to examine how conduct is guided and shaped, encompassing both the governance of others and the self through the ‘conduct of conduct’ as discussed in previous section (Busse and Hamilton, 2021, pp. 4–5). This involves practices, techniques, and rationalities that define appropriate behaviors and identities, shaping individuals as particular kinds of subjects through social, political, and institutional power (Sending and Neumann, 2006, pp. 654–658; Dean, 2010; Busse and Hamilton, 2021, pp. 3–5). Furthermore, Walter and Tazzioli (2023, pp. 2–4) note that governmentality has historically reflected the art of governing across

time, showing how authorities and experts have organized populations beyond the state, in diverse social domains such as bureaucracies, markets, and religious institutions (Walter and Tazzioli, 2023, pp. 2–4). It further denotes a specific regime of power, notably (neo)liberal governmentality in advanced societies from the eighteenth century onward, focused on managing populations via political economy and security apparatuses, shaping conduct through freedom, self-regulation, and indirect forms of authority (Busse and Hamilton, 2021, pp. 3–5).

Beyond these conceptualizations, governmentality also represents a practical lens for examining governance as a complex, distributed exercise or form of power (Sending and Neumann, 2006, p. 656). As such, this perspective moves beyond interrogations of state institutions, and instead expands on the ways in which governance operates through dispersed discourses, knowledge practices, and strategic technologies that may emerge in contexts distant from the state itself, for example, in towns, workplaces, churches, insurance systems, or colonial enterprises (Walter and Tazzioli, 2023, pp. 2–4). Thereby enabling an understanding of government as relational, emergent, and constituted through practices rather than simply institutional hierarchies (Walter and Tazzioli, 2023, pp. 2–4). Governmentality as an analytical framework draws attention to the interplay between power and knowledge, and how specific subjectivities are produced and maintained (Sending and Neumann, 2006, p. 656–657). It focuses on the rationalities which underpin governing practices, the techniques through which populations are managed, and the political technologies that render such practices effective (Sending and Neumann, 2006, p. 656–657). By examining these mechanisms, governmentality allows scholars to interrogate how authority operates, how individuals and populations are shaped as subjects, and how freedom and constraint are co-constituted within governance processes (Sending & Neumann, 2006, pp. 656–657; Foucault 2007 in Walter and Tazzioli, 2023, p. 4). In this way, the concept provides a toolkit for analysing both the historical emergence and contemporary forms of power in complex social and political contexts (Sending & Neumann, 2006, pp. 656–657; Walter and Tazzioli, 2023, p. 4)

3.3.3 The Internationality and Globality of Governmentality

The analytical scope of governmentality expands significantly beyond its original state-centric and European context, encompassing the supranational and global as constitutive sites of governmental power (Leira, 2021, p. 71). This expansion signals a fundamental reorientation in how power, rule,

and subjectivity are understood to operate (Leira, 2021, p. 71). As de Larrinaga and Doucet (2010, pp. 9–10) argue, what a global governmentality approach affords is a particular understanding of power and of the techniques and mechanisms through which forms of rule and subjectivities are produced, maintained, and transformed, enabling scholars to show how general economies of power, through specific and collective practices, govern spaces, things, populations, and individuals. Busse and Hamilton (2021, p. 3), thus contends that globality and governmentality are not merely related but simultaneously entangled and constitutive of one another, such that the globality of governmentality not only precedes and shapes but actively produces the diverse forms of thought and subjectivity that comprise IR today. While Leira (2021, p. 68) acknowledges that this intertwining is “logically connected to an understanding of governmentality as “history of the art of government”, he nonetheless notes that the analytical tools and conceptual vocabulary of governmentality remain applicable beyond Europe. Further enabling the interrogation of logics and practices beyond the government across time and space, without assuming sameness (Leira, 2021, p. 69).

Moreover, at the level of international governance, Sending and Neumann (2006, p. 658) demonstrate that the internationalization of governmentality is most effectively understood through the changing role of nonstate actors within global governance. Rather than representing a simple transfer of power from state to nonstate actors, this shift signals an “expression of a changing logic or rationality of government (defined as a type of power) by which civil society is redefined from a passive object of government to be acted upon into an entity that is both an object and a subject of government” (Sending and Neumann, 2006, p. 658). This reconstitution has profound implications for how governmental power operates internationally. As Merlingen (2003, pp. 362, 370) demonstrates, nonstate actors and IGOs function as apparatuses through which governmental rationalities and technologies are produced and circulated across international, transnational, national, and subnational scales, exercising forms of power that exceed and evade formal material and juridical limitations. In this sense, the globality of governmentality becomes less concerned with what the global entails, but “what it does to our thought and practices when it is invoked” (Busse and Hamilton, 2021, p. 3).

Beyond its constitutive function, global governmentality further illuminates the relational dynamics through which such political spaces are organized and governed (Stetter, 2021, p. 41). Global governmentality, applied to the international sphere, offers a framework for understanding how political spaces are organized through the interplay between governance from above and conduct from below (Stetter, 2021, p. 41). As Stetter (2021, p. 41–42), argues, a global governmentality decenters power within state institutions and sovereign actors, and instead highlights the productive dimensions of power across local, national, and international scales, and to the widened field of both formal and informal actors which shape the political and social orders (Stetter, 2021, p. 41). Thus, Foucault's notion of governmentality as the 'conduct of conduct' is central to this framework, as it captures how governing operates beyond direct coercion by shaping subjectivities, dispositions, and self-understandings (Stetter, 2021, p. 41). This in turn makes governmentality a powerful tool in governing conduct, as it molds "people's subjectivities and bodies that they nevertheless consider to be uniquely their own" (Stetter, 2021, p. 41). Governance from above, thus, operates in complex interdependence with everyday conduct from below, and cannot be meaningfully analyzed in isolation from it (Stetter, 2021, p. 41).

Extending Stetter's argument that governmentality molds subjectivities and bodies through the complex interplay of governance from above and conduct from below, Merlingen (2003, pp. 368–369) demonstrates how this dynamic operates concretely through IGO governance. Rather than governing through direct coercion, IGOs deploy techniques which aim to establish institutional arrangements that enable systematic regulation, administration, and control of national, political, economic, and social processes (Merlingen, 2003, p. 368). In doing so, such techniques seek to improve the vitality and security of a population, while simultaneously serving as "conduits for the circulation of oppressive power, subjecting populations to continuous monitoring, comprehensive regulations and precise controls by a heterogeneous alliance of international and subnational actors" (Merlingen, 2003, p. 368). According to Merlingen (2003, p. 370) these techniques not only combine procedures of hierarchical observation and normalizing judgement and examination, they also constitute a field of visibility in which the observed are subjected to the power of the observers through their objectification and constitution as cases, producing a normalizing gaze through which truth about countries and their populations is established (Merlingen, 2003, p. 370). Expanding on Merlingens argument, Jaeger (2010, 54), contends that

international organization actors such as the United Nations operate as a nexus for global biopolitics and governmentalities, constituting populations as objects of management and regulation through securitizing and normalizing rationalities that, crucially, reconstitute neocolonial power relations through the very governance mechanisms that claim to promote freedom and security. As such, the insights from Merlingen (2003, p. 370) and Jeager (2010, p. 54) effectively establish global governmentality as an analytical framework that demonstrates how international governance produces, normalizes, and hierarchizes the populations it claims to protect. This in turn raises critical questions about whose knowledge counts and whose subjectivity is rendered governable (Merlingen, 2003, p. 370; Jeager, 2010, p. 54). Extending Stetter's argument that governmentality molds subjectivities and bodies through the complex interplay of governance from above and conduct from below, Merlingen (2003, pp. 368–369) demonstrates how this dynamic operates concretely through IGO governance. Rather than governing through direct coercion, IGOs deploy techniques which aim to establish institutional arrangements that enable systematic regulation, administration, and control of national, political, economic, and social processes (Merlingen, 2003, p. 368). Thus, in the context of this study, governmentality as an analytical lens provides this study with the analytical tools through which UNMISS is examined not as a neutral security actor, but as a governmental instrument which deploys institutional techniques management and knowledge production to constitute South Sudanese women as legible and governable objects of protection.

3.4 Gender, Coloniality, and the Governmentality of Protection

While Foucault does not explicitly interrogate the subordination of women, scholars contend that Foucault's notion of power nonetheless valuable for investigating how power operates over women's lives through diffuse and indirect channels (Hekman, 2004, pp. 200–205; Reeves, 2021, p. 46). Governmentality and feminist scholars converge analytically in their shared instance that politics extends beyond formal state institutions and into social spaces and everyday life, giving way for a combined interrogation of the gendered hierarchies of public and private, and global and local, whose naturalization renders women's oppression invisible (McLaren, 2002, p. 167; Hekman, 2004, pp. 200–204; Reeves, 2021, pp. 147–148). A governmentality-informed feminist framework is therefore not only valuable in articulating complex notions of power, but it also

accounts for oppression as it operates through both broader social structures and the identities such structures produce, without treating them as fixed or as the foundation for challenging structural oppression (McLaren, 2002, p. 172). In doing so, it synthesizes the core analytical insights of socialist, radical, and postmodern feminisms into a more comprehensive and critical framework (McLaren, 2002, p. 172).

Following this, the concept of global governmentality further extends beyond state-centric and European context, encompassing the supranational and global as constitutive sites of governmental power, actively producing non-state spaces such as the Global South or East (Harrington, 2012, p. 54; Leira, 2021, pp. 68–69). As such, it simultaneously characterizes populations such as women as “requiring government outside of state frameworks and sometimes as needing defense against the state in which they reside” (Harrington, 2012, p. 52–53). Within international governance frameworks, women’s international organizations have been recognized authority solely within narrow discursive boundaries that governmental elites consider “women’s issues” (Harrington, 2012, p. 54). As such, constituting gender as a subcategory subordinate to broader governmental problems such as economy, development, culture, human rights, and security, which shape the discursive possibilities in the formation of social knowledge (Harrington, 2012, pp. 53–54). For much of the twentieth century, international policy addressing women was channeled predominantly through the UN development bureaucracy, where transnational women’s organizations were compelled to advocate for women within a governmentality that “rationalized intervention in distant economies and populations because it would help them develop toward the model of wealthy countries” (Harrington, 2012, pp. 53–54). This dimension of global gender governance is further demonstrated by Reeves (2021, p. 146–147), who notes that governmentality frameworks are able to account for the diversity of individual responses to governance, recognizing that attempts to manage populations are never totalizing but always encounter the messiness of localized power structures, historical legacies, and plural identities. This attention to the plurality of governed subjects and the unevenness of power’s reach is what necessitates a more precise conceptualization of gender as the structuring principle through which such governance operates (Reeves, 2021, p. 147). Gender and what is understood as the ‘global’ are therefore co-constituted through overlapping regulatory practices, with the production of gender as a social norm is deeply embedded in varying modes of governing that have historically encompassed the entirety of the globe as the frame of reference (Reeves, 2021, p. 147; Prügl, 1999, p. 4).

Importantly, this tension cannot be fully understood without addressing its colonial roots. The significance of gender as a principle of structure in global governmentality emerges through colonial conquest, when colonial enterprises imposed European gender codes in colonized societies, displacing existing social arrangements (Reeves, 2021, p. 147). This is illustrated by the colonization of Yorubaland in Nigeria, where prior to British rule social stratification was organized around age and kinship rather than gender, as the fundamental category of ‘women’ in Western gender discourses did not exist (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Reeves, 2021, pp. 147–148). These social arrangements and categories were systematically dismantled under British rule, leaving colonized women more deeply in shadow than their male counterparts (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Reeves, 2021, pp. 147–148). Moreover, the transnational women’s organizations that emerged from the nineteenth century and onward established women as a globally relevant category of personhood and positioned feminist knowledge as a legitimate form of expertise within international institutions (Harrington, 2012, p. 53; Reeves, 2021, pp. 148–149). Yet, such knowledge remained largely shaped by white middle-class perspectives until women of color became the majority at the 1985 Nairobi Conference, resulting in a turning point in the diversification of feminist knowledges accepted at the global level (Reeves, 2021, p. 148–150). Furthermore, the 1995 Beijing Conference furthered the global gender governance beyond development to encompass war and insecurity, contributing to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in 2000 (Reeves, 2021, p. 148–150).

The three theoretical and conceptual frameworks presented in this chapter, feminist security studies, decolonial theory, and governmentality, constitute the foundation of the analytical approach of this thesis. Each framework provides a distinct but interrelated dimension to the analytical lens applied to UNMISS. As such, the triangulation of these three frameworks directs attention simultaneously toward the discursive construction of women’s security within UNMISS mandates and protection frameworks, colonial structures that underpin such construction, and the epistemic marginalization that UNMISS may itself produce and sustain.

4. Methodology

While the preceding chapter presented the three frameworks guiding the analytical approach of this study. This chapter simultaneously outlines the methodological choice for interrogating the research questions of this thesis, and its operationalization.

4.1 Research Design

This thesis addresses research questions that are critical in nature, examining how South Sudanese women's security is constructed as a governance object within the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) through mandates, protection strategies, and gender frameworks. Given this critical disposition, the methodological approach employed in this thesis is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The choice to utilize CDA derives distinctly from theoretical framework of this study, which guides the analytical attention toward the gendered, colonial, and institutional practices through which women's security is discursively constructed as object of governance. As such, CDA provides the methodological mechanism through which these theoretical points are translated into analytical practice.

Critical Discourse Analysis is a problem-oriented, interdisciplinary form of discourse analytical research concerned with the ways in which social power and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and legitimized through textual and spoken language (Fairclough et al., 2011, p. 357; Wodak, 2014, p. 302; Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). Discourse in CDA is therefore simultaneously socially constitutive and socially conditioned, as it contributes to sustaining, reproducing and shaping “the status quo” (Fairclough et al., 2011, p. 358). Such discursive practices may therefore have significant ideological effects in producing unequal power between social classes, women and men, and ethnic groups, “through the ways in which they represent and position people” (Fairclough et al., 2011, p. 358). As emphasized by Fairclough (2023, p. 11), CDA brings the critical social analysis into the study of language by examining how discourse interacts with social elements such as power relations, ideologies, institutions, and social identities. Furthermore, as CDA interrogates patterns of access and authority over context, text, and the discursive strategies through which this authority is exercised and legitimized (van Dijk, 1995, p. 24; Fairclough, 2023,

p. 11). In doing so, directs sustained analytical attention toward relations of power, dominance, inequality, it likewise interrogates the way in which discourse simultaneously reproduces social domination and enables discursive resistance (van Dijk, 1995, p. 18; Wodak, 2014, p. 306).

As such, the employment of CDA in this thesis enables an examination of UNMISS related documents not as neutral descriptions of women's security in South Sudan, but as institutional texts through which authority, power, and inequality are enacted, maintained, reproduced, and legitimized (Fairclough et al., 2011, p. 357; Wodak, 2014, p. 302; Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). In this sense, the approach is directly relevant to the study's research questions, as it enables an analysis of how women's security is discursively constructed and governed, and positioned within UNMISS protection frameworks, and how particular forms of authority and expertise shape what counts as security and protection.

To operationalize this critical approach, the study draws on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which is further outlined and elaborated in the 4.4 section.

4.2 Case Selection

The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) emerges as a particularly distinctive and analytically significant site for examining the discursive construction of South Sudanese women's security as an object of governance within international humanitarian intervention. Within a broader system of global governance, the United Nations occupies a distinctive position as the focal point of global governance, with a global scope, near universal membership, and its extensive influence on international law, norms, principles, and international standards (Karns et al., 2015, p. 109). Concurrently, with its broad commitments to the advancement of gender inclusion within international security and peacekeeping operations, spearheaded by the Women, Peace and Security resolution 1325 in 2000 (True, 2009, pp. 41–42). Given its central mandate to protect civilians, UNMISS constitutes among the first peacekeeping operations to include an explicit focus on protecting women from conflict-related sexual violence and gender-based violence (Ibreck, 2024, p. 62). This establishes UNMISS not only as a concrete analytical site where gender discourses carries explicit implication on the ways humanitarian interventions are able to protect or promote women's security (Downman, 2016), but further points to its contribution in shaping

gender narratives in relation to peace and security through laws, policies, and practice (Otto and Heathcote, 2014, p. 1). Given that protection is simultaneously interpreted, contested, and transformed in practice (Ibreck, 2024, pp. 61–62), this further positions UNMISS as particularly relevant for examining how its mandate explicitly incorporates the protection of civilians and there within women’s security, making it a discursively rich site through which the relationship between protection claims and governance rationalities can be examined. As such, UNMISS provides a concrete site for analysing how women’s security may be shaped through governance practices that produce particular inclusions and exclusions (Ibreck, 2024, p. 62). Taken together, these features establishes UNMISS as a particularly valuable analytical case for this study, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the way women’s (in)security is discursively determined, prioritized, and managed by international actors, aligning directly with the aim of this thesis.

4.2.1 Scope of the study

To narrow the analytical scope, this study concentrates on the period from 2013 to the present which corresponds to the outbreak of civil war in South Sudan and the subsequent expansion of UNMISS’ peacekeeping operations within the country (de Coning and Felix Da Costa, 2015; Murphy, 2017). The eruption of civil war in 2013 signals a significant shift in the scale and operational responsibilities of UNMISS’ mandate in South Sudan, including the establishment of Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites (de Coning and Felix Da Costa, 2015, p. 831; Murphy, 2017, pp. 368–369 Russo, 2025, p. 45; Onor and Ndulue, 2026, p. 181). As such, this timeframe represents a period in which international protection regimes, and women’s security in particular, were increasingly being expanded and operationalized through the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, gender mainstreaming measures, and protection-focused institutional frameworks (Ibreck, 2024, pp. 62–65). Focusing on this particular timeline therefore enables this study to interrogate women’s security within a coherent intervention architecture, while also tracing continuities and shifts in protection logics over time.

4.3 Empirical Material

The empirical material selected for this study intends to capture the various institutional layers through which women’s security is discursively constructed, governed, and operationalized within the structures of UNMISS. Rather than approaching women’s security in South Sudan as a

monolithic category, the empirical material selected for this thesis is organized to illustrate the way security is constructed across formal mandates, institutional reporting, operational, gender focused documents. As such, the empirical material for this study consists of six interconnected categories, with each category directing analytical attention toward a particular institutional layer. The first category draws on two United Nations Security Council resolutions 2155 (2014), and 2729 (2024), which provides both formal mandates wherein UNMISS protection priorities are sanctioned at the highest UN authority. While the second category centers on the S/2014/158 Secretary-General report and UNMISS Human Rights report (2014), allowing further examination of how these formal commitments are circulated, interpreted and discursively maintained. A further component of the material (third category) comprises operational documents such as the Protection of Civilians (S/2019/741) and the 2025 UNMISS Human Rights Division Annual Brief on Violence Affecting Civilians (UNMISS HRD). These selected operational documents outline how protection, and within this women's security in South Sudan, is rendered practical. This includes the way threats to their security are classified, which forms of violence are prioritized or omitted, and what kinds of intervention is made actionable within the UNMISS framework. Moreover, a further central category consists of documents centered on gender and women's security such as the Secretary-General report on conflict-related sexual violence (2024) and the UNMISS/OHCHR Access to Health for Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in South Sudan (2020). These documents constitute the institutional sites where South Sudanese women's security is most explicitly articulated, framed, and linked to policy priorities. These documents are particularly valuable for examining how gendered subjects, harms, and protection needs are discursively produced within UNMISS. As such, the selection of material constitutes the foundation for the discursive analysis of this thesis, as it enables an examination of how women's security in South Sudan is constructed as a concrete object of governance through the institutional discourses of international intervention.

4.4 Coding and Operationalization

4.4.1 Operationalization

To operationalize the CDA approach employed in this study, the analysis builds on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which conceptualizes discourse as operating simultaneously at the level

of the text, discursive practice, and social practice (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, pp. 68–69). Fairclough’s model is particularly suited for the present study as it is a model based on the principle that “texts can never be understood or analysed in isolation - they can only be understood in relation to webs of other texts and in relation to the social context” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 70). In this sense, the model enables an analysis of the way in which women’s security is constructed and produced both within and across UNMISS related documents, as well as within broader institutional practices and structures of gender, coloniality, and governmentality. In this context, Fairclough’s three-dimensional model provides the analytical structure through which the theoretical framework is translated into methodological practice. However, while Fairclough’s three-dimensional model informs the analytical framework of the present study, the empirical analysis primarily centers on two of the three dimensions, the textual and discursive practice dimensions. This limitation is grounded in the explicitly institutional nature of the selected material, as well as the focus on how women’s security is constructed in specific UNMISS related texts and circulated across the UN institutional order of discourse. In addition, this further remains in line with Fairclough’s (2003, p. 2) understanding of discourse analysis as “one analytical strategy amongst many”, along with his view that “discourse analysis ‘oscillating’ between the analysis of specific texts and the broader order of discourse (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3)

At the text level, the analysis draws on attention to formal textual features such as vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and cohesion (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 69). However, the present study broadens Fairclough’s constricted linguistic analysis of such features, by interrogating recurring representations, categorizations, and thematic emphases through which women’s security in South Sudan is constructed within the selected material. Particular attention is directed towards the positioning of women in relation to protection and (in)security within the selected material, what constitutes a security threat, which forms of violence are foregrounded, prioritized or overlooked, and which protection responsibilities are assigned. Furthermore, the level of discursive practice focuses on the production, reiteration and stabilization processes of the documents (Fairclough, 1993, p. 78). For the purpose of this study, this level examines the way meanings are produced and circulated across the different institutional layers, which include mandates, mission reports, operational documents, gender-focused materials, and evaluative texts. This particular level of analysis illuminates how women’s security in South Sudan is translated from formal commitments

into operational and administrative discourse. At the final level, social practice, the analysis centers on the broader social practices and whether such discursive practice “reproduces or (...) restructures the existing order of discourse and about what consequences this has for the broader social practice” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, pp. 69–71). As such, the analysis of this study situates such discourses within the overarching theoretical framework of feminist security studies, decolonial theory, and governmentality, thereby enabling an examination of how women’s security in South Sudan is constituted as a legible and governable object of protection.

4.4.2 Coding Scheme

Table 1 Illustration of the coding scheme¹

Code	Category	Definition	Sub-codes	Guiding questions
A	Problematicization of women's insecurity	How the text defines women's insecurity as a problem requiring intervention.	A1. insecurity as sexual violence A2. insecurity as gender-based violence A3. insecurity as vulnerability A4. insecurity as exclusion from peace/politics A5. insecurity as humanitarian emergency A6. insecurity as lack of protection/capacity	What kind of harm becomes visible? What is left out?
B	Gendered subject positions	How women and other actors are positioned within the document	B1. women as victims B2. women as survivors B3. women as beneficiaries B4. women as peacebuilders/agents B5. women as dependent subjects B6. UNMISS as protector	Who acts? Who is acted upon? Who protects, and who is protected?
C	Governance rationalities and protection logics	How protection is made thinkable and governable.	C1. protection as prevention C2. protection as monitoring/reporting C3. protection as coordination C4. protection as capacity-building C5. protection as stabilization C6. protection as risk management C7. protection as technical intervention	Is protection framed politically, militarily, morally, or technically?
D	Authorized knowledge and expertise	Whose knowledge is treated as authoritative.	D1. UN expertise D2. legal/human rights expertise D3. statistics/assessments as truth D4. donor/international priorities D5. local knowledge absent D6. women mediated through institutions D7. institutional impartiality/objectivity claims	Who defines women's security? What counts as valid and credible knowledge?
E	Coloniality and representations of the local	How South Sudan, local actors, or local gender relations are hierarchically represented.	E1. local culture as obstacle E2. local deficiency/lack of capacity E3. external intervention as necessary E4. developmental/progress hierarchy E5. local agency minimized	How is “the local” framed? Is outside intervention presented as corrective or necessary?

¹ This visualization was made using the software Canva.

4.5 Positionality and Ethical Concern

Positionality in academic research simultaneously outlines the worldview and standpoint of a researcher in relation to their research, thereby motivating the topic of investigation, how the research is conducted, as well as the results (Yip, 2024, p. 222). For this reason, researchers “engage in reflexivity to address their influence on qualitative research (...) a type of ‘relational awareness . . . an interdependent awareness of how I as a researcher am influencing my research” (Yip, 2024, p. 222). Therefore, with respect to these considerations, it is essential to reflect and recognize my own positionality in writing this thesis, as a white woman born and raised in a Scandinavian (Western) country and enrolled in a Western academic institution.

Given the complexity of research positionality and as critically noted by Bloor et al. (2007, p. 4) and Wodak (2014, p. 305), it is essential for me to remain highly critical of my own role within the social structures relating to the topic examined in the present study, as I do not exist on the outside of societal hierarchy of power and status, but I am myself a subject to them. As such, the critical reflection of myself in relation to my/this thesis rests on my institutional, cultural and geographical distance from the context which is examined in this study. I likewise acknowledge that the present thesis itself is produced within the same confines of Western academic knowledge structures identified in the decolonial theory section of this study, as implicated in the reproduction of epistemic hierarchies.

As researchers frequently share the broader belief systems and attitudes of those whose discourse they investigate, either by belonging to the same social group or through engagement with it as an observer (Bloor and Bloor, 2007, p. 4), it is of further significance to point out that the employment of a strictly critical theoretical framework is not a neutral analytical choice. The utilization of critical, feminist, and decolonial theoretical framework in this thesis, instead reflects a particular epistemological commitment which serves to foreground the structural conditions through which women’s security is governed and the power relations that such governance reproduces.

5. Findings and Analysis

The following chapter of this thesis illustrates the findings and analysis jointly, interrogating the way in which women's security is discursively constructed within the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Given the interpretive nature of Critical Discourse Analysis, the selected UNMISS related materials are therefore not treated as neutral descriptions of women's (in)security in South Sudan, and instead approached as institutional texts through which women's security is rendered into an object of governance through discursive constructions. This chapter is therefore organized around the research questions underpinning this study and further proceeds through the text level and discursive practice level of Fairclough's three-dimensional model. In addition, the empirical material is organized into five categories: formal mandates (UNSCR), Secretary-General reports, official UNMISS reports, operational, and gender-focused documents. Taken together, these categorically selected documents enable an in-depth examination of how women's security in South Sudan is constructed, governed and operationalized, across the different institutional levels within the UN structure, as they operates at different capacities. In this sense, the material provides the empirical basis for answering the two research questions underpinning this study: first, how women's security is conceptualized, governed, and operationalized within the UNMISS-led humanitarian and peacekeeping intervention in South Sudan; and second, whose knowledge, expertise, and priorities shape UNMISS protection approaches to women's security, and which forms of knowledge are

5.1 Women's security: construction, circulation and governance

5.1.1 Text Level

At the textual level, the findings reveal that women's security in South Sudan is constructed through selective discursive patterns across all categories of the empirical material. These discursive patterns include vulnerability, protection and the threat and experiences of conflict related and gender-based sexual violence. Revealing that South Sudanese women's security is not neutrally constructed not consistently defined as a distinct category of concern.

Women's security as vulnerability and protection

The first textual pattern identified across the empirical material relates to the construction of women's (in)security through discourses of vulnerability and protectability, whereby women are positioned as subjects within a broader category of vulnerable populations requiring external protection provided by UNMISS. These specific discourse markers persist throughout the corpus, at all levels within the UN structure. However, they are most clearly illustrated in the documents produced in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the civil war, namely in resolution 2155 (UN RES/2155), report of the Secretary-General on South Sudan (S/2014/158), and the UNMISS Human Rights Report (2014).

Across all three documents, women are systematically positioned and categorized as simultaneously dependent and protectable subjects in need of UNMISS' protection (UN RES/2155; S/2014/158; UNMISS, 2014). At the formal mandate level, women along with children are appointed "specific protection", illustrating an implicit construction of women as vulnerable by grouping women alongside children, and classifying their protection as 'specific' (UN RES/2155, para. 4(a)(i)). In contrast, both the report of the Secretary-General on South Sudan (S/2014/158) and the UNMISS Human Rights Report (2014, p. 49), move beyond the implicit understanding of vulnerability and instead explicitly named and categorized as such. The UNMISS human rights report (2014, 49), states that the conflict in South Sudan had "exacerbated the vulnerability of women and children," while the report of the Secretary-General (S/2014/158, para. 63) refers to "the protection of vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and persons with disabilities". This implicit and explicit framing of South Sudanese women as requiring special protection from UNMISS can be understood through a hierarchical and gendered dichotomy between protector and protected, which primarily positions women within the same category as children (Wibben, 2009, p. 86; Otto and Heathcote, 2014, p. 1; Runyan, 2018, p. 82). It thereby echoes the broader feminist critique of the traditional or mainstream security discourse, in which women are frequently constructed as inherently vulnerable subjects (Wibben, 2009, p. 86). In this way, the grouping of women alongside children within a hierarchical protector/protected logic simultaneously legitimizes external intervention while reproducing relations of dependency and control (Wibben, 2009, p. 86; Otto and Heathcote, 2014, p. 1; Runyan, 2018, p. 82). Rather than approaching women's security in its broader complexity, these explicit constructions of women in

South Sudan as vulnerable, reproduce what Otto and Heathcote (2014, p. 1) describe as a gendered logic of collective security and peacekeeping, in which women are cast, often together with children, as vulnerable potential victims whose protection serves to justify and sustain international intervention. From a feminist security studies perspective, this obscures women's broader experiences of violence and risk which further reinforces a singular, vulnerability-based construction of "women" as the primary subject of security concern (Otto, 2014, pp. 164–165; Quek, 2023, pp. 112–114). In the South Sudan context, this implies that women are positioned primarily as subjects to be protected by UNMISS, while the nature of the threat and the terms of protection are institutionally defined.

Women's security through conflict related and gender-based sexual violence

The second discourse pattern identified across the material is the recurring construction in which women's security becomes most explicitly and institutionally legible when framed through gender-based and conflict related sexual violence. While this constitutes a second recurring pattern in the material, it does not stand apart from earlier discourse of vulnerability. Instead, the two intersect, as sexual violence emerges as one of the principal ways through which vulnerability is constructed across the corpus.

This is evident primarily in documents such as the special report of the Secretary-General (S/2016/951), the UNMISS Human Rights Annual Brief (2025), and the UNMISS Human Rights Report (2014). The analytical significance of these documents primarily rests on a discursive 'reformulation', where the predominant expression of gendered insecurity is through conflict related and gender-based sexual violence (UNMISS, 2014; S/2016/951; UNMISS Human Rights Division, 2025). The report of Secretary-General states that the level of conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan "remains an increasing source of concern, as is the threat of further violence, in particular against women and girls" (S/2016/951, para. 41(a)). Similarly, the UNMISS Annual Brief (2025, pp. 7–9), offers a comparable example, where conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and gender-based sexual violence (SGBV) are constructed as simultaneously critical threats to protection of women and the primary forms of violence affecting women and children.

In these two reports, sexual violence becomes closely tied to the construction of women as vulnerable, not only through its positioning as an increasing and primary threat to women, but also through the simulations grouping alongside with children (S/2016/951, para. 41(a); UNMISS Human Rights Division, 2025, p. 7–9). This connection is further reinforced in the UNMISS Human Rights Report (2014, p. 49), where women’s vulnerability is explicitly articulated through their exposure to sexual violence. This emphasizes how women’s insecurities become constricted through institutionally recognized categories, as this selective form of harm emerges as the clearest and most legible expression of women’s insecurity within the broader UNMISS protection discourse (S/2016/951; UNMISS Human Rights Division, 2025). As a result, women are positioned primarily as subjects of violation, with conflict-related sexual violence emerging as a key object of intervention. In this way, gendered harm is absorbed into a framework of violence against women, through which sexual violence becomes the predominant marker of women’s insecurity (Sjoberg, 2016; Runyan, 2018, p. 105). This, in turn, renders such violence governable through international policy, punishment, and protection mechanisms, rather than recognizing it as embedded within the broader violent logics of war itself (Baaz and Stern, 2013; Runyan, 2018, p. 82). Within this schema, the protection of women becomes central to the justification of peacekeeping intervention and wider international engagement in post-conflict reconstruction (Otto and Heathcote, 2014, p. 1).

In closing, the findings at the textual level illustrate that women’s security within the UNMISS context is constructed through two interconnected discursive patterns. First, women are repeatedly positioned within a vulnerability-based protection framework, often grouped alongside children and rendered legible as dependent and protectable subjects in need of external intervention. Second, women’s insecurity becomes most explicitly visible when framed through conflict-related and gender-based sexual violence, which emerges as the primary and most institutionally recognizable expression of gendered insecurity. In this way, women’s security is not constructed as a broad political or social condition, but through narrow categories of vulnerability, protection, and sexual violence that privilege certain forms of harm while leaving others less visible.

5.1.2 Discursive practice

At the discursive practice level, the analysis shifts from how women's security in South Sudan is textually constructed to how these constructions are reproduced, circulated, and maintained across the selected empirical material. The discursive patterns identified at the textual level, particularly vulnerability, protection, and conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence are not confined to individual texts. Instead, they are reiterated across the corpus through various institutional layers of the United Nations structure. As these constructions circulate across mandates, Secretary-General reports, and UNMISS material, women's security becomes linked to a set of institutional techniques through which insecurity is rendered legible, manageable, and actionable (Busse and Hamilton, 2021, pp. 4–5; Sending and Neumann, 2006, pp. 656–657). Thus, the discursive practice level focuses on how these recurring constructions travel across formal mandates (UNSCR), Secretary-General, and official UNMISS reports, and how they are translated into reporting, monitoring, administrative, and protection practices that reinforce particular understandings of women's insecurity.

At this level, the vulnerability-based construction of women's security established at the textual level is reproduced and reinforced across the empirical material. The discourse of vulnerability and protection begins in the formal mandates, namely resolution 2155 and 2729 (UN RES/2155; UN RES/2729). While women are largely subsumed into the broader PoC framework in respective resolutions, their explicit security is however articulated through the “specific protection for women and children” against threats of physical violence, sexual and gender-based violence (UN RES/2155; UN RES/2729). Illustrating a discursive continuity across the Security Council mandates, by reinforcing women's position as subjects requiring targeted safeguarding by UNMISS, and further demonstrating the circulation of women's security through vulnerability (UN RES/2155; UN RES/2729). This discursive continuity can be understood through governmentality's focus on the rationalities and techniques through which conduct is shaped, as women's security is repeatedly constructed in terms that make it legible for protection-oriented intervention (Dean, 2010; Sending and Neumann, 2006, pp. 656–657).

Concurrently, the vulnerability/protection-based construction of women's insecurity established in resolution 2155, is reformulated in resolution 2729, where it is translated into CRSV and SGBV as recurring objects of intervention (UN RES/2155; UN RES/2729). This reformulation is likewise identified at the Secretary-General, operational and gender focused level, where vulnerability expressly becomes visible when it is established as an "increasing source of concern" and "further threat of CRSV", particularly against women and girl (S/2016/951; UNMISS, 2019, UNMISS Human Rights Division, 2025). Vulnerability at the mandate level, particularly in resolution 2729, is turned into practice through the translation of women's insecurity into recurring institutional mechanisms (UN RES/2729). Such mechanism include monitoring, investigating, verifying, and reporting, particularly in relation to all forms of CRSV and SGBV (UN RES/2729). These institutional practices demonstrate how women's security is approached as a matter of ongoing threat of CRSV and SGBV requiring specialized UNMISS oversight, and something to be managed through external reporting mechanisms (S/2016/951). Through these institutional oversight mechanisms, women's security is not merely a general commitment protection, rather, their security appears as something to be investigated, classified and reported on (S/2016/951). Moreover, the operationalization through institutional action and techniques which construct particular forms of violence publicly and institutionally actionable, such that international governance can be understood and analysed as operating through forms of monitoring, classification, administration, and intervention which render particular populations such as women both actionable and governable (Merlingen, 2003, pp. 368–370).

The conceptualization of women's security through CRSV/SGBV as a prioritized object of intervention, is further carried forward in the operational and gender-focused material. In both of these categories within the material, women's insecurity is reproduced through the circulating institutional language of CRSV/SGBV, protection, and accountability (UNMISS Human Rights Division, 2019; UNMISS, 2020). In the UNMISS HRD (2019) women's insecurity is translated into technical and administrative forms of interventions which include incident-based tracking, disaggregated data, corroboration of CRSV findings, and advocacy language calling for protection and accountability. In this sense, the translation of women's insecurity into tracking, corroboration, and reporting illustrates how these techniques combine procedures of hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and examination, constituting a field of visibility in which the observed

are subjected to the power of the observers through their objectification and constitution as cases (Merlingen, 2003, p. 370). Expanding this argument, Jaeger (2010, p. 54) contends that international organization actors such as the United Nations operate as a nexus for global biopolitics and governmentalities, constituting populations as objects of management and regulation through securitizing and normalizing rationalities that reconstitute neocolonial power relations through governance mechanisms that claim to promote freedom and security.

Taken together, the analysis suggest that women's insecurity is not only described, but circulated across the corpus as something that can be documented, classified, verified, and acted upon. In this way, CRSV and SGBV emerge as the primary institutional markers through which women's insecurity is rendered visible, legible, and governable.

5.2 Women's security through institutional knowledge, expertise and priorities, and exclusions

5.2.1 Text Level

At the textual level, the selected material shows substantial findings regarding the positioning of UNMISS as the central institutional authority through which women's insecurity is observed, defined, and made institutionally legible. Across the mandates, Secretary-General, and UNMISS reports, UNMISS' authority is repeatedly constructed through the language of monitoring, investigating, verifying, reporting, and analysis through which women's security is defined, classified and produced as public knowledge. In this way, women's insecurity becomes legible primarily through institutionally produced forms of knowledge, particularly those tied to CRSV and SGBV.

The predominant discursive pattern that emerges across the material is a continues positioning of UNMISS and the wider UN institutional structure as the central institutional authorities on women's (in)security. This is clearly exemplified in Secretary-General report S/2014/158 and the mandate documents UN RES/2155 and UN RES/2729, where UNMISS is established as the actor with the power to “*monitor, investigate, verify, and report* immediately, publicly, and regularly on

abuses and violations of human rights and violation of international humanitarian law, including against women and children and all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence” (UN RES/2155, para. 4 (b)(ii); UN RES/2729, para. 3(d)(i)). This also indicates that UNMISS protection priorities are shaped around those forms of insecurity that can be institutionally monitored, investigated, verified, and publicly documented, particularly CRSV and SGBV (S/RES/2155, para. 4 (b)(ii); S/RES/2729, para. 3(d)(i)). This pattern is further reinforced in the Secretary-General report, which states that “UNMISS has given *utmost priority* to *monitoring, investigating, verifying* and *reporting* on the most serious of allegations (of violence)” (S/2014/158, para. 28). Moreover, this specific discursive pattern is further reiterated in the Secretary-General’s special report on South Sudan further reiterated this emphasis in more specific terms, stating that “UNMISS will strengthen its work towards the implementation of Security Council resolutions 1960 (2010) and 2106 (2013) by *monitoring, analysing* and *reporting* on patterns and trends in conflict-related sexual violence” (S/2016/951, para. 41). As such, these documents depict UNMISS’ sustained position as the central actor producing institutionally authoritative knowledge of insecurity and protection in South Sudan. This in turn speaks to the conceptual separation between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge, by decolonial scholar Aníbal Quijano (Viramontes, 2022, p. 46). In this sense, the material underlines the consistent way through which UNMISS is constituted as this knowing subject by producing, constructing, defining and deciding what counts as legitimate violations against South Sudanese women’s security (Viramontes, 2022, p. 46). In contrast, South Sudanese women are frequently positioned as the object of knowledge to be defined, observed, classified and further reported on (Viramontes, 2022, p. 46).

This partiality for such institutional mechanisms resonates with decolonial critiques of the hierarchy of knowledge, in which the rationalities of modern Western science are positioned as the most appropriate mode of producing truth, effectively marginalizes alternative epistemologies as inferior or illegitimate (Viramontes, 2022, p. 46; Hassan and Sajjad, 2023, p. 27). In the context of UNMISS, this illustrates the way observable, investigative, reportable, and ultimately quantifiable forms of knowledge are privileged in regard to women’s security, rather than local South Sudanese interpretations and the women’s own experiences.

However, the local and lived experience have been included within the material is limited to a separate document, as demonstrated in the UNMISS's (2020, p. 7) report on access to health for survivors conflict-related sexual violence report. This report is comprised of approximately 248 interviews, which include 113 were survivors of sexual violence (103 women and 10 men), conducted by UNMISS human rights officers (UNMISS, 2020, p. 7). As well as group discussions with women and survivors in multiple locations to "corroborate local perceptions of available health services in the targeted areas (...) to illustrate the longer-term physical and mental health impacts of sexual violence" (UNMISS, 2020, p. 7). As such, this report underscores that while local and lived experiences are incorporated, they become legible under the epistemic conditions established by the UNMISS, particularly when corroborated by its human rights officers and translated into institutionally recognizable, quantifiable or observable categories (UNMISS, 2020, p. 7). The report further states that "HRD employed the *reasonable grounds to believe* standard of proof in making factual determinations as to violations, abuses, incidents and patterns of conduct documented in the report, and gathered information in accordance with the human rights monitoring and investigations methodology developed by OHCHR" (UNMISS, 2020, p. 7). This reflects Viramontes (2022, p. 47) argument that the hierarchy of knowledge does not merely identify pre-existing forms of knowledge but constitutes it through normative criteria. As such, this discursive pattern of institutional authority and privileged knowledge, suggest that women's security in South Sudan is not only framed through a narrow framework of violence, particularly conflict-related and gender-based sexual violence, but likewise through selective forms of expertise in which institutional, legal, and reportable knowledge is treated as most authoritative.

5.2.2 Discursive practice

At the text level UNMISS' position of authority is established through common UN mechanisms of monitoring, investigating, verification, and reporting on women's security. In regard to the discursive practice, the analysis extends beyond the question of who speaks with authority, and instead focuses on the reproduction and circulation across the material through the reiteration of the mandate language, specific institutional techniques, prioritizations and categorizations of insecurity, and claims of institutional expertise and knowledge. This shift in analytical focus is captured by Dean's (2010) notion of government as 'conduct of conduct', as these institutional

mechanisms, viewed from a governmentality lens suggest that authority not only pertains to the shaping of behavior from above, but also depends on rendering populations knowable and visible as objects of intervention.

The UNMISS' central role of authority on women's security, established at the text level, is distinctly reproduced and reinforced across the material. This is especially evident in the formal mandate documents, especially resolution 2155 (2014), which mandates UNMISS to protect civilians and "monitor, investigate, verify and report" on violations and abuses against women and children, particularly sexual and gender-based violence (UN RES/2155, para 4(b)(ii)). This authority on women's security is further reinforced through the positioning of women as requiring "specific protection", and thereby effectively establishing UNMISS as the actor responsible for recognizing and responding to these insecurities (UN RES/2155, para 4(b)(ii)). Furthermore, the same oversight discourse markers are subsequently echoed and further expanded on in resolution 2729 (UN RES/2729). Thereby, expanding UNMISS' authority through more developed institutional measures such as various types of analysis, data collection, early warnings, survivor support, technical assistance, and accountability mechanisms (UN RES/2729). Such specific oversight and analytical measure employed in respective resolution, suggests that these specific forms of knowledge enable UNMISS and therein the broader UN apparatus to render women's security legible as a field of governmental intervention (de Larrinaga and Doucet, 2010, p. 6). Therefore, institutional techniques employed by UNMISS can be regarded not neutral but productive, as they allow authorities to "think, reflect, and calculate" the insecurities affecting South Sudanese women as a problem of government beyond the juridical framework of sovereignty, particularly in relation to the health, welfare, and conduct of those governed (de Larrinaga and Doucet, 2010, p. 6).

Subsequently, this discursive pattern is likewise evidently reproduced and circulated at the level of UNMISS, however, the institutional practices through which the privileged knowledge is sustained differs from that of the mandate documents (UNMISS, 2014;). In this way, while the role of UNMISS as an authoritative producer of knowledge on women's security is formally established in resolutions UN RES/2155 and UN RES/2729. It is then operationalized and circulated in UNMISS reports through precises of investigations, corroboration, public reporting, as well as technical methodology (UNMISS, 2014). In the UNMISS Human Rights report (2014,

10), the data and information collection is presented as ‘impartial’ and in compliance with the principle of ‘do no harm’, while further stating that HRD employs a ‘reasonable grounds’ threshold in “making factual determinations on individual cases, incidents, and patterns of conduct”. In this light, UNMISS thereby upholds its epistemic authority through its established institutional position (2155), and likewise the methodological circumstances under which knowledge is rendered credible and reliable (UNMISS, 2014, p. 9–10).

Against this background, UNMISS draws on its authority as an international actor to produce and shape knowledge on security, especially women’s security, thereby contributing to the production and maintenance of specific subjectivities (Sending and Neumann, 2006, pp. 656–657). This is evident in the rationalities underpinning its governing practices, whether framed as the protection of civilians and “women and children” or as the investigation and documentation of allegations of human rights and humanitarian law violations across South Sudan. These practices are carried out through techniques such as monitoring, investigation, reporting, data collection, interviewing, and corroboration, through which populations are managed, and such practices are rendered effective (Sending and Neumann, 2006, pp. 656–657).

In closing, the findings at the discursive level indicate that UNMISS and the wider UN institutional structure are repeatedly positioned as the central authorities through which women’s insecurity in South Sudan is defined, classified, and produced as institutionally valid knowledge. Across the formal mandates, Secretary-General reports, and UNMISS material, authority is reproduced through the recurring language of monitoring, investigating, verifying, reporting, and analysis, while women’s insecurity becomes legible primarily through institutionally produced forms of knowledge tied to CRSV and SGBV. Moreover, read through Quijano’s distinction between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge, this suggests that UNMISS is constituted as the authoritative knower, while South Sudanese women are more frequently positioned as the objects of knowledge to be observed, categorized, and reported on. In turn, this reflects what Viramontes describes as a hierarchy of knowledges in which institutional, reportable, and quantifiable forms of knowledge are privileged, while local interpretations and women’s lived experiences remain marginal unless translated into institutionally recognizable and methodologically validated categories. Taken together, the material suggests that UNMISS protection approaches to women’s

security are shaped primarily by institutional expertise and epistemic authority, while other ways of knowing women's insecurity remain constrained or excluded.

6. Conclusion

The point of departure of this thesis was to critically interrogate the way women's security was discursively constructed, governed, and operationalized within the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), drawing on feminist security studies, decolonial theory and governmentality. In doing so, a Critical Discourse Analysis was employed to examine UNMISS related mandates, operational strategies, and gender frameworks. The findings and analysis of this study demonstrated that women's security in South Sudan is not treated as a neutral or self-evident category within UNMISS. Rather, it is actively produced through institutional discourses, protection logics, and authorized forms of knowledge as a legible and governable object of intervention.

In relation to the first research question, on the construction, governance and operationalization of women's security within UNMISS, the findings show that women's security is constructed through two interconnected main discursive patterns. First, women are repeatedly positioned within a vulnerability-based protection framework, often grouped alongside children and rendered legible as dependent and protectable subjects in need of external intervention. Second, women's insecurity becomes most explicitly visible when framed through conflict-related and gender-based sexual violence, which emerges as the primary and most institutionally recognizable expression of gendered insecurity. As these constructions circulate across mandates, Secretary-General reports, and UNMISS material, women's insecurity becomes linked to institutional techniques such as monitoring, investigating, verifying, reporting, and analysis, through which it is made visible, manageable, and actionable (Busse and Hamilton, 2021, pp. 4–5; Sending and Neumann, 2006, pp. 656–657). In this sense, women's security is not constructed as a broad political and social condition, but through narrow categories of vulnerability, protection, and sexual violence that privilege certain forms of harm while leaving others less visible.

In relation to the second research question, which is concerned with the knowledge, expertise, and priorities shape UNMISS protection approaches to women's security, the analysis demonstrates that UNMISS and the wider United Nations institutional structure are repeatedly positioned as the central authorities through which women's insecurity is defined, classified, and produced as institutionally valid knowledge. Across the selected material, women's security becomes legible primarily through institutionally produced forms of knowledge tied to CRSV and SGBV, while authority is reproduced through the recurring language of monitoring, investigating, verifying, reporting, and analysis. This privileges institutional, reportable, and methodologically validated knowledge, while local interpretations and women's lived experiences remain marginalized unless translated into institutionally recognizable categories. Thus, the findings suggest that UNMISS protection approaches to women's security are shaped primarily by institutional expertise and epistemic authority, while other ways of knowing women's insecurity remain constrained or excluded.

Taken together, the findings of this thesis suggest that UNMISS protection regimes do not merely respond to pre-existing insecurity, but actively construct women's security through gendered, colonial, and governmental logics that simultaneously claim to advance protection while reproducing narrow terms of recognizability, dependency, and epistemic marginalization. In this way, the thesis contributes to broader debates on peacekeeping, gender governance, and the colonial dimensions of international security by showing how women's security in South Sudan is not only a matter of protection, but also a site of governance through which power, knowledge, and intervention are organized and legitimized.

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