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Achieving Human Rights through Education for the Women and Girls of South Sudan

In 2011 South Sudan emerged from one of the longest civil conflicts in the world to become the world's newest country. From 1955 to 2011, a religious civil war between North Sudan and South Sudan cost two million lives. The Muslim and Arabic-speaking people in the North identify themselves as "an inseparable amalgamation of Islam and the Arabic language" (Middle East Quarterly). The people from the South identify as indigenous African in race, culture and religion, with "Christian influences and a Western orientation" (Middle East Quarterly). South Sudan received their independence from the North on July 9, 2011 when "secession from Sudan passed with nearly 99% of voters in favor of the split" (Briney). With this independence, the Sudanese were both proud and relieved to be free from the North. Although the independence is a positive for South Sudan, there are negative aspects to the secession. Years of war have scarred the North and South with a legacy of hardship and violence, especially violence towards the South Sudanese women.

The Honorable Dr. Priscilla Joseph Kuch, Deputy Minister of Gender, Child and Social Welfare of the Republic of South Sudan says that "for men [security] is about borders and defense; for women it is about the health care, access to water, education and sustenance" (Goldberg). Dr. Kuch believes that violence against females in South Sudan is a major obstacle for the development of the country. The men may not realize or want to accept that the females they believe should be subservient to them are actually the key to the success of their new and developing country. If they gave women a chance to prove what they can do instead of just seeing women as unimportant then they will see improvements in government, economy and social development. Through education the women of South Sudan should be able to receive human rights; by educating them and showing the men that the women can be so much more than just a punching bag or just someone to be subservient to them.

The Sudanese typically have large families because in their culture, the more children you have, the better off the parents will be in their elderly years because they will have more children to care for them. The typical Sudanese family has seven to nine members. In fact, if a Sudanese female decides to not get married or not to have children, they would be widely considered as insane. In the Sudanese culture before a couple can get married, the male must offer the female's family a certain number of cows. The number of cows varies from 100 and higher. Once a male pays to wed the female, the male has complete authority for all household discussions and expects his future wife will cater to him. The wife is expected to prepare the food for her husband. Some of the foods prepared are asida, kisra, and medida. Asida is a thick porridge, kisra is similar to a flatbread, and medida is porridge made from sorghum/corn, wheat flour, water, sugar, yogurt, and peanut butter. Females are expected to be subservient to males, they are expected to behave in certain ways, and they are expected to do all the womanly duties, such as cooking, cleaning and looking after the children. Males are expected to be strong, protect their family, keep their wives and children in line, and to not show emotions or even shed a tear. Children are taught of these ways from birth because they are expected to pass these customs on to future generations.

Currently, South Sudan is working on building a new education system. The number of children that have enrolled in primary school has doubled since 2005-2009. The alternative education system in South Sudan has helped some 200,000 people catch up on the education that they have missed. Though this is good news, there are still millions of children who live in poor rural areas who do not attend school. There are over two million adults who are illiterate. In the first six years of primary school, the dropout rate is 60%. On average, a classroom has 129 students. Each teacher has 80 students. Only three out of

five teachers are paid by the government. Recent testing of sixth graders who attend urban schools found that only 35% of language questions and 29% of mathematics questions were answered correctly.

The importance of educating the girls is not seen as an important issue for most Sudanese people. “UNESCO estimates that for every 20 girls entering first grade, just 11 make it to third grade and one reaches eighth grade” (Higher Education for Women in South Sudan). South Sudan has the world’s highest maternal mortality rate, “2,054 per 100,000 live births” (Education is Key to Supporting Women in South Sudan), it also has the lowest female illiteracy rate. This means statistically that more girls are more likely to die of pregnancy-related causes than to complete primary education (Education is Key to Supporting Women in South Sudan). According to UNICEF, less than 1% of girls’ complete primary education and that only one school child in four is female. In South Sudan, female illiteracy is the highest in the world. An estimated 90% of females are illiterate.

Most South Sudanese people may not be familiar with a health care system because the standard of health care is not high and there is a shortage of doctors and medicines. It is important to be treated by a doctor of the same gender and most people will “refuse treatment by a health care professional of the opposite gender” (South Sudanese-Born Living in Australia). Family members who are sick, disabled or elderly are taken care for by the family. In the country, there are “very few modern facilities even for those who can afford it” (Birungi), and not many people can afford healthcare. A press statement from the International Committee of the Red Cross revealed, “women, children, and the wounded remain particularly vulnerable because of the lack of quality of healthcare in South Sudan” (Birungi). According to Dr. Fred Wani of the Juba Medical Complex, everyone is at risk. Dr. Wani says “I don’t think the government is putting any effort in doing anything to improve the health service since they were destroyed during the war period.” Further Dr. Wani notes, “The government hospitals lack virtually everything, including diagnostic equipment, which the government should be able to purchase with the kind of money they have been wasting” (Birungi).

Even though South Sudan is among the least developed countries, it has a large variety of resources. In fact, more than 90% of the land is suitable for farming. But because of the conflict with the North, the people of South Sudan are left with a limited amount of “access to basic services for its people” (Our Work in South Sudan). Approximately 50% of the land in South Sudan is prime for agriculture because the soil and climate are suitable for providing a wide variety of cash crops and food, mangos, apples, mandarins, bananas, and oranges. South Sudan has the potential to be a successful agricultural country. The country has the sixth largest animal herds in Africa with 11.7 million cattle, 12.3 million sheep, and 12.6 million goats. However, there are many challenges. While South Sudan has the potential to have a strong and vibrant agricultural economy, decades of war have left many in chaos. Some of the most serious challenges include persistent human rights violations, illiteracy, lack of access to clean water, lack of a sustainable infrastructure to support economic growth, and lack of both institutional and manpower capacity.

In addition, the people in South Sudan face many challenges in their day-to-day life. One of the challenges that they face is having clean water for cooking, bathing and drinking. Without safe water, millions of people have to “trek miles every day to collect water from ponds, marshes, ditches or hand-dug wells” (Water for South Sudan). Even when they travel those many miles, the water they find is contaminated with things like parasites and disease-bearing bacteria. The contaminated water can cause sickness and even death. According to *Clean Water for Families in South Sudan*, “One in every five children does not reach their fifth birthday.” Goldberg (2013) states:

To help the Sudanese, we could drill water wells in the middle of towns through Water for South Sudan that provides clean water and easy access for the Sudanese. Lack of clean water affects everyone in South Sudan, but gender based violence affects the

women and girls in an unbearable way. Violence against women in rural areas has increased 37% and 47% in cities.

South Sudan has a Child Act that states that girls under the age of 18 should not be wed, but unfortunately, child marriage is widespread. Goldberg (2013) says that this threatens the “economic and educational progress of women and girls, as well as their health and security”. Women and girls continue to experience widespread violence, discrimination and marginalization. In fact, rape is being used as an instrument of war. Most girls are terrified to walk to school because it is during these walks that young girls are often abducted. Gender-based violence and other forms of violence towards females are considered the norm in South Sudan. These violations are not just an abuse of human rights but they also impede the progress and participation of women in the new country’s economic and social development.

Girls are afraid to walk to school. There are numerous incidences of girls as young as 9 years old being abducted and forced into child marriages. But there are ways to tackle these basic human rights violations by developing strategies that educate mothers to educate their own children. Efforts might center on providing mothers educational tools, such as notebooks, pens/pencils, and reading books. With these tools, mothers could teach their children how to read and write in safety of their own homes. This would alleviate and hopefully reduce the frequencies and dangers associated with young girls being abducted. If mothers are too busy and don’t have enough time to home-school their children, a system could be set up in which mothers would take turns teaching. For example, Mother A could teach all the children how to read and write on Mondays and Tuesdays, Mother B would teach on Wednesdays and Thursdays, and Mother C could teach on Fridays and Saturdays, leaving Sundays as a “non-school” day. The classes could be held in the middle of the village, and the schooling could be for a few hours each day, leaving sufficient time for the children to help their mothers with family chores.

Educating girls does not just result in a happier and healthier life for females; it also benefits society as a whole. If developing countries like South Sudan were able to educate their girls, then there would be a decrease in the maternal mortality rate, “reduced incidences of HIV/AIDS” (Investing in Girls’ Secondary Education in Developing Countries), children would be more likely to live to the age of five, and educating girls can also help by contributing to “higher rates of economic growth at the national level, and live more fulfilled lives” (Investing Girls’ Secondary Education in Developing Countries). An educated woman is more “likely to marry at a later age in life and have fewer children. Studies from a number of countries suggest that an extra year of schooling will increase a woman’s future earnings by about 15 per cent, compared with 11 per cent” (Girls’ Education: A Lifeline to Development). If girls have opportunities to pursue education or micro loans, many of them could flourish and run businesses. Helping women can be a successful poverty-fighting strategy anywhere in the world. When Lawrence Summers was chief economist of the World Bank he wrote “Investment in girls’ education may well be the highest-return-investment available in the developing world.”

One way to invest in helping South Sudan would be to teach women how to farm. Women could be shown how to construct grow boxes, and then plant different types of crops. These women farmers could form a cooperative and come together on a routine basis to buy each other’s crops. Microloans to women farmers could transform their lives and the lives of their families, by allowing women to start their own farms, raise livestock, or start small businesses. By investing in simple projects such as these, we could help families have fresh, healthy crops, improve a family’s nutrition and health, while helping females experience a sense of empowerment. This simple shift to giving women a means by which to feed their own families could impact their health and wellbeing as well as their children’s for generations to come.

Project Education South Sudan (PESS) is helping fund and support efforts to build primary schools in the rural Bor area in the Jonglei State of South Sudan. PESS has made a commitment to emphasize the inclusion of girls and women in the educational opportunities (Project Education South Sudan). PESS

also provides “clean water wells, commercial grinding mills, cinderblock-making mills, sewing machines and annual school supply money” (Project Education South Sudan). In addition, PESS is working towards leadership development for girls, women’s income literacy, teacher training, and female hygiene in conjunction with HIV/AIDS awareness and preventive health (Project Education South Sudan). Using UNICEF’s accountability model for funding projects, other non-government organizations would do well to follow the holistic approach being used by PESS in South Sudan.

French foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, who founded Doctors without Borders, has said, “Progress is achieved through women”. If men in developing countries like South Sudan stopped seeing women and girls as replaceable and inferior, the country as a whole would be better off. Violence against women is not and should not be considered the norm anywhere. Females and males both deserve the right to be educated. Young girls should not be afraid of being abducted as they walk to school. They should be able to go to school and know that all males will treat them with respect. Women should be able to know that they will be able to provide for themselves as well as their families. Mothers should not have to worry about not having clean water. Mothers should also not have to worry about losing a child to deathly parasites or bacteria in their drinking water. By creating water wells that provides clean water and easy access we create a feeling of security for everyone in South Sudan. Mothers should not have to fear the safety of their daughters. By educating the women and girls of South Sudan, we can create a future for generations to come and improve the country as a whole.

I am Sudanese. My parents believe females should do all the housework and that only the males should work outside the home. At home, I have to follow my parents’ beliefs. However, as I’ve learned about strong females like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Blackwell, and Emily Murphy, I’ve grown to appreciate and truly value the education I am receiving in the U.S. It is very upsetting to know that there are girls my age in South Sudan who think being abused and uneducated is the norm. I constantly wonder how I would have turned out if my parents hadn’t made the decision to come to America. I wonder how girls in America would respond if they knew there are millions of girls in other countries willing to do anything to be able to come to America to be educated—millions of young girls in South Sudan and other counties who worry daily about being abducted or raped.

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