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Sold, Abused - The Plight of South Sudans Forgotten Women

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South Sudan has struggled for decades to liberate itself from a hardline north. South Sudanese women are waging a similar struggle for the basic rights over their bodies and minds in a new nation where civil war has ended, but violence and sexual abuse still thrive.

In a dusty courtyard in Rumbek, women gather to discuss issues they have never been allowed to talk about in a public forum.

A show of hands reveals that only four of some 60 women in the group have ever been to school, and only two chose their husbands.

Questions about domestic abuse are difficult to raise in a nation where many people consider it normal for a woman to be beaten and abnormal for a wife to leave her husband.

In South Sudan, a woman's family can demand a large dowry of cattle for her to be given in marriage. To guard their potential value, most women are kept at home to prevent them from becoming pregnant. The few that make it to school are often dragged out and married off to allow older brothers to get a bride.

But widow Mary Ayei Yai, who has eight children, says that the deal often leaves women wide open to abuse and trapped in a transaction that can not be undone.

She says it is good practice to pay the cattle, but when you realize later on that your daughter is being mistreated, and as a mother you say you do not want them to allow that, they say they paid you lots of cattle.

Priscilla Kuai Mamed is a volunteer women's activist working for the International Rescue Committee (IRC), an American aid agency that runs women's programs in Lakes state. She says that there is usually violence against women in Lakes as clans are still fighting.

???She says that in recent fighting there were many cases of women being raped along with their daughters. While many people were looted and had everything stolen, women were the biggest victims, she says, despite the fighting being between men.

Mabed says that when fighters attack a village and cannot find any men, they terrorize the women. She says the “lucky” ones are only beaten. The unlucky” ones are raped and beaten unconscious.

At IRC’s clinic for gender-based violence (GBV) in Rumbek's state hospital, nurse Abendego Mabior Nyinde says that awareness of the dangers of diseases such as HIV/AIDS is prompting more women to report rape.

But he says many women do not speak out because of the stigma and the fear that admitting a rape will lower their value as a potential spouse.

“If one has been raped, and then people hear about the rape, then that’s a problem they will say: ‘The son of so is not supposed to marry the one that has been raped’, because that one has been raped. And that’s why some now, they just disappear in the village,” Nyinde said. "When they have experience raping, they don’t want to report it because they think that ‘if I report, it can break my confidentiality, and everyone can know.’”

Jenny Becker, IRC’s gender specialist in the Lakes, says getting women out of abusive situations is a task that authorities are often scared to tackle.

“They’re really actually putting their life on the line if they want to step in and stop anything - actually using the law is very dangerous for them,” she said. "It’s additionally hard as there are certain members of the government, of the judiciary and the police service that still practice early marriage, so what do you do when the people supposed to be upholding the law break the laws themselves and there’s no consequences for them?”

At the Ministry of Gender and Social Welfare in South Sudan’s capital, Juba, officials say although the rights of women are enshrined in law, in reality customary law and a patriarchal culture trump them.

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