

The precious chance to go to school

by Isabella Kitari Feliciano

I am a student at Comboni Secondary School in the south Sudan capital, Juba. I am a leader in the local chapter of the Girls' Education Movement. GEM is a pan-African initiative to bring about positive change in the lives of girls.



Less than two years ago I spent my schooldays wondering if I would have to run from the classroom to escape shooting. Today I am eighteen years old, in my first year of secondary school. And instead of worrying about bullets, I am raising my voice on behalf of other young people. Juba saw a lot of fighting. Many of us died. People couldn't even walk across the main bridge for fear of being beaten by soldiers. There were bombs everywhere. Soldiers would harass us, searching our bags, saying that they were looking for explosives. Landmines kept us at home. I remember a day when we weren't allowed to go to a prayer meeting unless we were accompanied by an armed soldier. What kind

of childhood is it when you can't even go to church without a gun?

The war has made us poor. Many children in the villages don't go to school because they can't pay school fees. These children are mostly girls – because people think girls don't need education, and because they think that a girl's destiny is just to be a wife. I don't see things that way. There are so few girls who complete their education here. Only one girl in a hundred even finishes primary school. But I am going to school so I can gain the knowledge that will help me rebuild my country. When I grow up, I want to become a lawyer so I can oppose the things that are wrong – in southern Sudan and in the

whole world. I want to change all the things that keep girls out of school. I want to change the fact that girls have to get married even if they're just twelve or thirteen. I want to make sure that girls don't leave school because they get pregnant. I want to make sure that no-one laughs at a girl because she is menstruating and doesn't have the money she needs to buy sanitary supplies. I want to make sure that girls like these don't say, "it is better for me not to go to school."

Through GEM, this year I participated in the launch of the Go To School initiative and even sang in front of the President of South Sudan. In front of so many people, I called out, "Good morning southern Sudan, let all children go to school!" I learned that day that my voice is strong and powerful. Now I want to use my voice to help other children go to school. I want to tell the world that education should be free, that it is the right of every child. I want the world to know that we are grateful for peace but that we are eager for much more. We need teachers who will encourage our spirits. We need schools that have desks and chairs; food to keep us from hunger; uniforms, shoes and school supplies. June 16th is the Day of the African Child. It commemorates a time when thousands of children in South Africa marched in the streets to protest discrimination and demand equality in education. Today marks 30 years since that march in Soweto. I'm glad that I can be part of a tradition of young people working for justice. And I'm proud that today my voice is strong enough to join in the calls for change.

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