

# Gender, education and peace in southern Sudan

by Jackie Kirk

*Expanding access to education for boys and girls is a critical Millennium Development Goal and peace-building challenge. In southern Sudan, as in other post-conflict societies, many girls remain excluded from schooling opportunities which could help develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes to build a peaceful society.*

The SPLM's Secretariat of Education (SoE) has explicitly linked gender, education and peace within the Directorate of Gender Equity and Social Change. This forward-looking move recognises the potential of education to enhance a gender-just peace. The SoE now has the challenge of addressing very high expectations for education in ways which are regionally, ethnically and gender equitable. Regional disparities are significant: girls in Bahr El Ghazal, Upper Nile, Nuba Mountains and Southern Blue Nile face considerable and practical challenges in accessing education as there are so few schools in these areas.

The Gender Equity Support Programme (GESP) of the SoE/Sudan Basic Education Programme (SBEP)<sup>1</sup> provides scholarship support to over 2,000 girls and women in secondary schools and teacher training institutions. Designed to address barriers to girls' education, it provides funds to secondary schools and teacher training institutions based on the number of girls and women enrolled. This includes a fixed fee subsidy for girls. Decisions about how to use the rest of the money are made by the schools through a participatory process involving male and female students as well as teachers and school board of governor representatives. In addition, each girl receives a

'comfort kit' including sanitary pads, underwear and soap.

An initial assessment indicates that the GESP is contributing to increased enrolment, reduced drop-out rates, lower absenteeism and improvements in the conditions in which the girls study and live. Comfort kits are enabling girls to spend longer in the classroom and to no longer absent themselves during menstruation. Their distribution has opened up discussion of a previously un-addressed subject and raised awareness among male teachers of girls' specific needs.

Peace building in southern Sudan requires a shift from authoritarianism and patriarchy towards more democratic and participatory approaches. Schools are a critical site for this transformation, not only because the students in the schools today are potential future leaders but also because schools are key institutions in communities with the potential to model new ways of working. The GESP has potential to make the experience of schooling for boys and girls more gender-responsive, participatory and student-centred.

However, the institutional capacity to understand and implement new and complex concepts such as student participation and gender-responsive teaching is limited. Male teachers,

despite becoming more aware of girls' needs and perspectives, lack information and tools to transform their teaching practices accordingly. Schools and training institutions are requesting more input and support, including teacher training and capacity building, to facilitate, for example, more gender-responsive and democratic teaching methods in the classroom and increased status for women teachers.

Curriculum and learning materials are important forces for gender equality. They should enable both boys and girls to succeed in school, to assert their rights and to enable them to actively participate in development and reconstruction processes. In the absence of a common curriculum, secondary schools use Ugandan or Kenyan curricula, teaching and learning materials or a combination of both. The development of a new curriculum and examinations system for a new state is a critical opportunity to rethink what children learn in schools and to reorient the content and processes of schooling to promote equity and peace.

To do so requires rethinking not only primary and secondary school curricula but also what – and how – trainee teachers learn. With support from the SBEP, a unified teacher education curriculum is being developed with an emphasis on student-centred methodologies and democratic approaches in the classroom. There is a new focus on teachers' roles as 'agents of change' in schools, communities and the nation. Teachers need to be actively engaged in creating and sustaining gender-responsive – and especially girl-friendly – schools and classrooms.

Educational reconstruction and transformation in post-conflict contexts require input from both men and women. However, in southern Sudan there are few women teachers and even fewer women in education management roles. Increased numbers of women teachers in schools could improve educational opportunities and experiences for girls. Increased girls' enrolment and retention may then lead to a larger pool of women ready and interested in teacher education and, ultimately to larger numbers of women teachers.

As more women come into teaching, attention must be given to ensuring that women teachers are considered full members of the school team with the same status and expectations as male teachers, and not only associated with helping girls cope with menstruation and avoiding early pregnancy. Attention to these issues should include training for all teachers, as well as communications materials such as posters and radio announcements to recruit and retain women in teaching.

As a recent USAID report has highlighted<sup>2</sup>, gender-based violence (GBV) is a very real issue for women

in southern Sudan. Gender-based violence – or the fear of it – can limit girls'/women's participation in education. Parents may keep daughters away from school for fear of attack on the way to and from school. Women in fear of beatings from their husbands are unlikely to become teachers and community agents of change. Teacher training and student workshops are important venues to address GBV. Teachers can also be an important part of the necessary reporting and response mechanisms through which those affected by GBV may access help – but should follow a very clear code of conduct and violation response procedures. Setting such reporting mechanisms in place is a challenge when there is so little of the educational infrastructure in place.

### Recommendations

Education for gender equity and peace in southern Sudan will require:

- establishment of transparent and democratic systems of education management and administration
- new strategies to recruit more women teachers
- grounding teacher training con-

tent in women's as well as men's experiences and perspectives

- designing training specific to the needs of women teachers: these should not be considered as 'remedial' but as opportunities for women to share experiences, discuss gender issues and develop capacity for leadership and peace building
- assisting female teachers to take up positions in educational management and administration
- empowering women and men teachers to be agents of protection against GBV.

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1. [www.ineesite.org/standards/sbep1.asp](http://www.ineesite.org/standards/sbep1.asp); [www.careusa.org/careswork/projects/SDN093.asp](http://www.careusa.org/careswork/projects/SDN093.asp)
2. [www.womenwarpeace.org/sudan/docs/usaid-gbv.doc](http://www.womenwarpeace.org/sudan/docs/usaid-gbv.doc)

*Sudanese  
returnee teenage  
pupils at Yei Girls  
secondary school.  
UNHCR plans  
to replace it with  
a boarding school  
outside Yei.*

