

WOMEN IN SOUTHERN SUDAN: Claiming a Peace Dividend

by PAUL JEFFREY

Tamara Kako rises in the predawn darkness and carries her plastic jerrycans through the shadows the moon leaves between the thatched-roof huts of Yei, a war-ravaged town

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in Southern Sudan. At the well women gather to pump the squeaky handle and fill their containers with water their families will drink and use for bathing. It takes several trips to get the morning's water, and as sunrise nears more and more women show up. The line gets longer and patience shorter. But Ms. Kako hasn't even started carrying water home. For four hours she carries water on her head to construction sites or the homes of wealthier families,

earning the equivalent of \$2 a day. Only then, when the sun is high in the sky, can she start carrying water home to her six children.

With all the violence tearing through Africa, Southern Sudan has been almost forgotten. After decades of war between the largely Christian south and the predominantly Arab-Muslim government in Khartoum ended with a peace treaty in 2005, the world's attention moved on to Darfur and other hot spots.



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Tamara Kako prepares a plot of land for a vegetable garden tended by her and other United Methodist Women members in Yei, Southern Sudan. The women live precariously, but at peace after years in camps in neighboring Uganda and the Congo.

Yet, the promise of peace for the south remains shaky. Unresolved questions linger about who benefits from oil revenues. And as the region approaches a 2011 referendum on whether it will break all political ties with Khartoum, southern political leaders struggle to make postwar democracy work efficiently.

Amidst this maelstrom of political questions, Ms. Kako and millions of other women rise in the darkness before Southern Sudan's dawn in a courageous effort to make it through one more day.

A widow, Ms. Kako's first husband was killed as war washed over

the region. In 1990 she fled to Uganda to escape the violence, marrying again until she threw the second husband out for being a drunk. Life was difficult as a refugee, but Ms. Kako found consolation and hope in a United Methodist congregation that formed in her refugee camp.

Then in 2004 she came home.

"There wasn't enough food in Uganda, and I thought that peace was taking hold here," she said, explaining why she returned with her children. "Yet peace only meant an end to the fighting. It hasn't brought a better life. We still have to struggle every day to survive."

Ms. Kako said much of the hope she experiences today comes from her participation in United Methodist Women, which gathers several times during the week in a dirt-floored thatched chapel at the edge of Yei. The women pray and sing together, and as the planting season began they dug the ground together, preparing a common garden with seeds they obtained from the United Methodist Committee on Relief. And with funds from a small microfinance project the United Methodist Women manages, Ms. Kako buys grain and resells it in the town's dusty market, making a small profit in addition to what she

Members of United Methodist Women in Yei, Southern Sudan, pray after working together to prepare a plot of land for a vegetable garden. Photo by Paul Jeffrey.



needs to repay the loan. She uses the money to buy food and keep three of her children in school. The others dropped out, their mother unable to afford the meager fees.

According to Edina Tumalu, the president of United Methodist Women in Southern Sudan, Ms. Kako's daily struggle is all too common.

"There is often just one well for a thousand homes or more," Ms. Tumulalu said.

The women want to get the water right now, this morning, so they can go home and make tea, while others need to hurry because they need to take their grass or their firewood to sell in the market. Yet there's only one well. A woman wants to get water, but there are six other women there wanting water as well. Some have left their babies inside to go to the well, so they start fighting, scrambling over that one well. It simply isn't enough.

"So they start taking water from the river that isn't safe," she said. "Because many people defecate outside, when it rains these feces wash into the water. The women contract diseases which are expensive to heal. And they lose lives. This is a big issue for women. They need clean water so their children won't die of diarrhea. Many children died of cholera last year in Yei."

After decades of intense violence, such suffering seems part of the landscape.

"Women and children die every day, and people think it's normal. But it's not normal," Ms. Tumulalu said. "This is worse than the war of guns we had before."

The toll of war

The toll of the civil war in Southern Sudan goes far beyond the more than 2 million people who died during the decades-long struggle. Because they were repeatedly displaced by the fighting, most women in Southern Sudan are today illiterate. While schools have opened in

villages throughout the nascent nation today, other barriers interfere with educating girls.

"Because of cultural beliefs, many people don't allow girls to benefit from education," Ms. Tumulalu said. "They think girls have to grow up and get married, so they are taught domestic duties at home. You can see boys relaxing while they overwork girls. Women are treated like slaves, not really having rights like any other person on Earth."

"Women need education. If they could get some vocational training, some construction or agricultural skills, then they could at least manage to dig and plant. With new skills, they could earn a living, and the orphans they care for won't have to go into the



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Cecilia Oba is a member of the Southern Sudan Parliament.

streets looking for how to survive. But women are completely forgotten."

This discrimination against women is dramatically evident when a woman becomes a widow, Ms. Tumulalu said. Tradition gives the dead man's family the right to take everything, leaving the widow and her children destitute.

A new constitution being drafted for Central Equatoria State seeks to remedy this, assuring widows of their rights to own land that was in their husband's name.

"If a woman is courageous enough, now she can use the constitution to defend herself," said Cecilia Oba, a representative of Yei in the Central Equatoria State Parliament. "She can say, 'I also have rights, and my children have rights, and we have to have some of the property.' Because usually if the dead man has a house then his brother will show up and take it, even if the wife and children have nowhere else to go."

Such legal protection for widows is one fruit of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005, which charted the course of the new nation. In a victory for women's advocates, who argued it was minimal recognition of the key role that women played during the liberation struggle, the agreement specified that women should fill at least 25 percent of government posts. Yet getting past the number to real participation is a stubborn challenge.

"Although women make up 25 percent of the people in government offices, few women are placed in key positions," Ms. Oba said. "And those who suffer intimidation. When there's a meeting, the director tells the men but not the women. And if we come anyway, they put us in the ugly chairs far away. I insist that we must be assertive. I always force my way into sitting in a chair near the head of the meeting."

Ms. Oba said that when church leaders are invited to a public gathering, women are neither seen nor heard.

"When we invite the public to a workshop we always send letters to the churches," Ms. Oba said. "But who gets the letter? You've never seen a bishop who's a woman. It's not common to have women pastors. So the letter lands in the hands of a man, who informs his male colleagues. They would never think that women in the church could represent them."



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Women and the church

Women played key roles in establishing the United Methodist presence in Southern Sudan, including, Ms. Tumalu noted, a woman from the United States who purchased a plot of land at the edge of Yei for the congregation to build a chapel and school. Nancy Denardo, a member of Port Vue United Methodist Church in McKeesport, Pa., raised \$1,000 in 2005 to purchase the property just as the small congregation was being forced to vacate the bombed out house it was using near the center of town.

Yet Ms. Tumalu said women in the United Methodist Church in Southern Sudan aren't allowed to freely follow God's calling.

According to Isaac Sebit, a pastor who serves as acting coordinator of the denomination in Southern Sudan, women shouldn't be pastors "because they are not even-tempered."

Ms. Tumalu, who says she feels called to be a pastor, disagrees.



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Edina Tumalu is president of United Methodist Women in Southern Sudan.

"God can use men and women equally in the church, but women and women pastors and deaconesses are undergoing a lot of suppression," Ms. Tumalu said. "Women are not allowed their freedom in the church. Like long ago when people

thought that women couldn't participate in the government, they've now transferred that attitude to the church."

Ms. Tumalu suggests that such discrimination within the church keeps it from a unique historical opportunity to help the larger Southern Sudanese society develop responsible leadership.

"There's too much corruption in the government," Ms. Tumalu said. "But it's not the government's role to correct itself, the church should take an upper hand in helping the government fulfill its role. Many times politicians say they're doing this and that, but when good things come along they forget about the grassroots."

"The CPA says we should have free education, but the number of street children is increasing. There is too much selfishness. Our officials have learned how to use the innocent for their own benefit. So the church needs to take the upper hand to assure that human rights are really respected. Be-



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Left, women in Yei, Southern Sudan, fight for access to water from a well provided by the United Methodist Committee on Relief. On opposite page, United Methodist Women members prepare land for vegetable planting in Yei, Southern Sudan, as part of a group food security project.

cause if the corruption continues, tomorrow someone will go into the bush and the fighting will continue. If the children are forced to join the army again, we will lose yet another generation. It's high time for us women to beg the church to intervene in getting government officials to do the right thing for the nation of Southern Sudan."

The right thing for the south will have repercussions for far more than the 12 million people who live there. The collapse of the peace process in the south would most likely doom any chance of resolving conflicts in Darfur and other areas of Sudan. Yet, Ms. Tumalu said, Southern Sudan has never been as newsworthy as the smoldering conflict in Darfur.

"During the decades we fought against the north, the outside world wasn't as concerned with Southern Sudan as they are now with Darfur," she said. "It's good they're helping in Darfur, because we know that the war that Doctor John started opened

the eyes of all Sudan. That's why when people in Darfur realized that the Arabs were doing something bad to them, they went into the bush and rebelled against the government."

John Garang, was the charismatic U.S.-educated leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Army who was killed in a helicopter crash just weeks after he signed the CPA.

That some in the south sound jealous is not surprising.

"In Darfur there are hospitals," Ms. Tumalu said. "And although it's a desert, there is clean water. But here there is no clean water and the hospitals are horrible. And the peace agreement was signed how many years ago? We're losing more people now than during the time of the war."

The conflict with Khartoum isn't the only challenge facing the people of Southern Sudan. Serious internal tensions linger between tribal groups within the south, most notably between the Dinka, who occu-

pled key leadership positions during the war, and other tribes. Many residents of Yei, who are mostly Kakwa and Pojulu, feel discriminated against by the Dinka who control the national capital of Juba.

"Sometimes people from our region aren't allowed to go work in their region," Ms. Tumalu said. "If you are working there you have to rent, but before you rent you have to build your own hut, and then you rent it, and when your time is up they send you away. If you resist they kill you. When they come to the Equatorial region, they take everything, including most of the jobs. That irritates the other tribes to start rebelling against them. This is very dangerous. People are preparing now for tribal wars. Even people in the church are involved in this. How can we educate people to leave behind tribalism and start living together in unity so we can rebuild the nation of Southern Sudan?" ■