

Aguka payam, Tonj South county, June 2023



Grace, on far right with other WPT members during a mentoring and training session in Aguka Payam, June 2023

Like millions of other girls in South Sudan, Grace lived in daily fear that one day she would be forced to do something she did not want to do-be forced out of school and into an early marriage. For Grace, it was not a far-fetched concern as according to a study by the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa, more than ten girls are forced into marriage every week in South Sudan, and over 50% of all girls in the country are married-off before the age of 18, which leads to many of these girls dropping out of school.¹ When Grace was 15, her fears of Child Early Forced Marriage (CEFM), almost became a reality when had her first menstrual period. Central to the the cultural beliefs for most communities in South Sudan, a girl's first menstrual is viewed as a sign that she is a woman - ready for marriage and motherhood. *"My father never wanted me to continue with school after my first menstruation, he told me that I was going to get married"* says Grace. However, Grace opposed the idea of dropping out of school to get married, this frustrated her father who then resorted to physical violence to compel Grace to accept getting married but this attracted the attention of her community members who reported him to police, as well as the intervention of the Women Protection Team (WPT) chairlady who interceded by rescuing Grace from her father and facilitating her to return to school in Tonj town. This action provided Grace with relief from the pressure to enter into a forced marriage and allowed her to continue her education.

Coincidentally for Grace, NP had started working in her community of Tonj South in 2021 and thereafter established a Women Protection Team in October 2021 in Aguka Payam, which worked to address protection concerns pertaining to girls and women. The Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP)-WPT led mentor and trainings sessions focusing on Child Protection (CP), Gender Based Violence (GBV) and CEFM were held repeatedly through which WPT members were well equipped to initiate their own activities, including patrols and awareness campaigns in Aguka- through which Grace come across with the WPT. During monthly meetings, the WPTs regularly shared their experiences in resolving issues, with a particular focus on cases of domestic violence occurring in Aguka and its environs, their commendable work gained recognition from the local authorities, such as the Payam administrator, who acknowledged the WPTs and their valuable contribution.

Additionally, Grace's upbringing in Aguka Payam, Tonj South County where she had already seen what early marriage could do ,gave her the courage to resist her father's pressure for an early marriage. Indeed, she recounted to NP during an interview on 22 June, 2023, in NP's office in Tonj South county, saying that *"some of the girls who were forced to get married before finishing school faces a myriad of challenges, they cannot look after themselves, their children too and most of them have left their marriages, I do not want that for me, I want to be different and that is only if I finish my school"*. Currently, Grace is studying with a renewed sense of tranquility, optimism, and determination, knowing that her future is in her own hands. She is preparing for her final national exams in senior four scheduled for November 2023. *"I feel listened to, I feel confident in myself and I have peace of mind. I know I will pass my final exams and go to university.* Grace's school teacher acknowledges her eagerness to study and confidence in herself, *"Grace is a very active student, she is willing to learn I am confident that she will be a great asset to this community and country if she continues her education"*. To this end, Grace has already demonstrated this by furthering her knowledge on GBV and her willingness to be able to help other girls who face the same situation. Grace became the youngest member of the WPT and upon her membership added *"I became a member of the WPT because they helped me so much, I like what they do, as such I also want to help other girls to get out of such situations of forced marriage like the way they helped me"*.

¹ " Gender Alert: Child and Forced Marriage-Shattering Dreams of Young Girls in South Sudan," Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa, <https://sihanet.org/gender-alert-child-and-forced-girls-in-south-sudan/>.

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Grace continues to urge girls in her community of Aguka payam and elsewhere who are faced with similar challenges to stand up and believe in themselves. During the June 2023 interview, Grace added, *“I want to share an important message to my younger sisters in Aguka and elsewhere in the world, I want to encourage them to stand up for yourselves and resist the pressure of early marriage, believe that your goals can be achieved. My message my fellow girls is that if you wish to fulfil your dreams, then you should be able to express yourself and make people hear you.”*

As has been the case since 2021, whereby NP through funding from US-AID’s Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), has been working to increase the safety and security of civilians through direct protection, child protection, early warning and early response, violence prevention, aimed at promoting community resilience mechanisms, NP will continue to do so and champion for an end CEFM in a collaborative and empowering manner through which community members like Grace are role models within their respective communities.