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 she had her first menstrual period. Central to 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.

GRACE: THE YOUNG GIRL WHO DARED TO RESIST CHILD EARLY FORCED MARRIAGE

Aguka payam, Tonj South county, June 2023

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 fulfill 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.