

In Spite Of The Many Ongoing Challenges There Is Hope For Women In South Sudan

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Picture: Sudanwildlife.com.

FRIDAY FILE: The pace of change has been slow for South Sudan since it became the newest country on 9 July 2011.

AWID spoke to Lilian Riziq, Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Irrigation in Western Bhar El Ghazal State, Wau about some of the challenges for women in the fledgling nation.

By Susan Tolmay

AWID: It has been nearly a year since South Sudan became an independent nation, what, if anything, has changed for women in South Sudan during this period?

Lilian Riziq (LR): I want to believe that the government has done something for development and changes to take place but there have been tremendous challenges, including the border demarcation and conflict over oil reserves, which have hindered the government from being able to deliver on development in the way they want. We have a document called The *South Sudan Development Plan*, which is the development plan for the country for the next three years

There have been some changes in terms of women being more vocal. Women constitute 25% of the national constitution review commission, but of course we had to make a noise for women to be included. At the moment there is a process of consultation in forming the national election commission and women are pushing for the 25%, so there is progress in terms of women's representation in decision-making. There is also more religious freedom in South Sudan and no restrictions on what women can wear, unlike in Sudan. The south is less conservative and there is clear separation between religion and state.

However, there are many areas that need attention, for example in terms of security of women and families living along the border where there is conflict and there is also the issue of food security, women's health and maternal mortality.

But women are coming together and there are a lot of women's organisations already working to educate women about their rights in the constitution and issues pertaining to peace, security and development. There is a huge international focus on South Sudan at the moment and organizations like UN Women are there to support the empowerment of women, so many women's organisations are taking advantage of this support.

AWID: The issue of citizenship has been hotly contested since the separation, why is this issue so important for women?

LR: Citizenship is a very important issue because people have been displaced as a result of the two countries separating. There is a lot of inter-marriage between Sudanese and South Sudanese women and men and there are families involved. The Nationality Act of South Sudan provides for dual citizenship, while this is not the case in Sudan where people from

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South Sudan do not have a right to Sudanese nationality. Many people lost their Sudanese citizenship after the secession, despite living there, having houses, working and their children going to school etc. This is a crucial issue, especially for women and especially for women along the border.

In both countries people are expected to register as foreigners if they don't have nationality so that they know how many foreigners are living there. But in South Sudan there is flexibility with people from Sudan, who can own property, live and work in the country and they are not being asked to leave. In Sudan, however, they are forcing South Sudanese people leave the country and hundreds of people are being deported and transported from Sudan every day.

AWID: Prior to independence, an interim constitution in South Sudan stipulated that women must constitute 25% of the representatives in legislative and executive bodies has this happened?

LR: In general we have not achieved the 25% in all areas. There are 25% women in parliament^[1], but only one of six advisers to the President is a woman and in Cabinet only four key Ministers out of 29 are women (14%). Women only make up 10% of Independent Commissions and only 6% of Under Secretaries. The hope is that these women will advance women's rights and there are many women's rights organisations advocating for women's rights. We now have the women in parliament so we need to see how these groups can work together.

However, the problem remains cultural norms and social attitudes that are ingrained and which discriminate against and marginalize women. This is why education is so important because the more girls gain access to education the more likely we are to see a shift. But this may not happen in our time because attitudinal change takes a long time, we might only see change in the next generation.

AWID: Has there been progress in terms of realizing the provisions in the interim constitution?

LR: Not so much in just one year, there are a lot of beautiful provisions in the transitional constitution – including access to education, the rights to participate in public life, widows now have the right to inherit property etc. But what we are lacking is implementation, because it has only been one year and the country has been going through a lot of changes, trying to figure out their external and internal challenges. We are now starting a review of the transitional constitution to make it a permanent constitution, and this will hopefully be done by the end of next year.

AWID: In the process of making the constitution permanent do you think there will be any changes to the provisions on gender?

LR: The changes that we might see won't necessarily affect the bill of rights, people are more concerned about things like the type of government we might have and the power of the President the right to food for example. There are some additional issue related to women rights that women want to see in the final constitution, including marriageable age - because article 15 talks about the family but doesn't stipulate the marriageable age - and we have a lot of young girls getting married and dying giving birth, experiencing domestic violence etc. Women want to see marriageable age defined as 18. Another important issue is the right to health and health care because South Sudan has the highest maternal mortality rate globally. Women also want to see the 25% quota increased to 30%.

AWID: Have women from Sudan and South Sudan been organizing together before and since the separation?

When I was the CEO of the Southern Sudan Women's Empowerment Network (SSWEN), before the referendum on South Sudan, we organized a joint conference with women from the North, for mainstreaming women's agenda in the post referendum arrangements. The focus of this meeting was the involvement of women in negotiations - asking how we could organize ourselves as women coming from both countries and voice our concerns.

At the time parties from the north and south were negotiating on the post referendum arrangements but women were not involved in these discussions and even up to now the National Congress Party don't have a single woman on their delegation. It is similar for

South Sudan negotiating team, Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM), which only has five women out of 45 on the delegation. We sent a letter to the former President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, the African Union High Implementation Panel, AUHIP who was mediating the negotiations asking him to include more women at the negotiating table – but it was not considered. And even in the ongoing negotiations over the border, oil reserves and some contested areas there are still very few women at the negotiation table. So women are again coming together and asking to be involved in negotiations so that we have a say in what is happening.

We also have an online Forum where women from the north and south talk to each other about general issues and are in solidarity with each other. What we really need is for women from both countries to come together to analyse this conflict, and our views should be considered because we are affected by the conflict in many different ways.

AWID: There as been a lot of conflict between the two countries since secession, how has this affected women and what is the situation now?

LR: It takes a little bit of time to destroy but it takes a long time to rebuild. As a result of years of conflict the women of South Sudan were very traumatised because they were abducted, raped, displaced and discriminated against. But now you look at them and they are smiling because there's hope for a better future. Although there has not been very much change – there are not enough health care facilities and we still have a lot of challenges as I mentioned earlier - they see a light at the end of the tunnel and we all do. I don't imagine that we would be able to achieve everything in a year – many things were destroyed by the 22 years of conflict and it is going to take time to rebuild. But we are taking baby steps towards the change we want.

[i]Upper and lower houses combined, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

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