



U.S. EMBASSY JUBA, SOUTH SUDAN
Office of Public Affairs

FOR RELEASE ON MARCH 8th

March 8, 2014

**Celebrating International Women's Day in South Sudan:
Op-Ed from U.S. Ambassador Susan D. Page**

Today, the world celebrates International Women's Day. While the day itself is meant to be a celebration of the role women play as the foundation of a strong society, the day is also a reminder that women are often an afterthought in society. This tendency, to treat women as an afterthought, is a dangerous habit. The fact is, where South Sudan will go next will depend entirely on what happens to its women. This conflict has led to heartbreaking realities that threaten to unravel the gains South Sudan has made since independence. Women have been forced to give birth without medical attention, under trees. Girls have been raped and murdered in the safe haven of the church. In the makeshift IDP camps on UNMISS compounds, where everyone is suffering, women and girls run the risk of being sexually assaulted. Even far away in Addis Ababa, women are at the periphery of the very discussions meant to return peace to a country that has suffered too long under the shadow of violence. What sort of future will this treatment of women build for South Sudan? How can this violence against women and girls possibly lead to a sustainable future for the country? These atrocities are incongruous with the direction South Sudan must travel if it is to overcome the conflict that currently plagues the country. And yet, it is not too late to turn things around. Even in the heart of the uncertainty produced by conflict, there are immediate steps that can be taken to ensure the future of women, and that of South Sudan.

The first and most important step, is to educate women. Send your girls to school, immediately. An educated woman knows how to do more than just survive; she knows how to uplift her entire community. The completion rate for girls from primary school through the end of secondary school is less than one percent. If less than one percent of girls are graduating, then what are South Sudan's chances for success? And yet, across the country, young girls are forced to drop out of school because they are married off at an early age, or they are left to bear the burden of caring for younger siblings. Women are far more than just marriage tokens to be traded for in cows and SUVs. They serve a more valuable purpose than as just babysitters. They are the center, the very core, of what South Sudan will become. When women are educated, the entire country is empowered. Just next door to South Sudan, Kenya boasts Ms. Ory Okolloh, a Harvard-trained lawyer and founder of Ushahidi, which aids citizens all over the world in reporting acts of violence. Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie has revolutionized the literary genre through her work, and has been heralded as one of Africa's greatest writers. Zambia's



U.S. EMBASSY JUBA, SOUTH SUDAN

Office of Public Affairs

Dambisa Moyo is a world-renowned economist who is transforming the very structure of foreign aid in Africa. All of their success and that of their home countries would not be possible if they had been taken from school and forced to marry at an early age. If South Sudan wants to match the Okollohs, the Adichies, and the Moyos of this world, it must allow for its women to be educated.

It is just as important to empower women. As president Barack Obama stated, “Empowering women isn’t just the right thing to do – it’s the smart thing to do.” In the midst of South Sudan’s current conflict, what mechanisms are in place for women's voices to be heard? There are brilliant, talented women in South Sudan right now who are actively working on a variety of social and political issues. I applaud the work of organizations such as the South Sudan Women's Empowerment Network. The work they do to ensure that the rights of women are respected is of paramount importance to the country as a whole. Whether it is legislation that protects women's rights or it is a series of programs that provides skills-based training, it is imperative that as a country, women have access to the tools needed in order to succeed.

Lastly, it is necessary to join women. The fight for equal rights is inherently unequal if only women are involved. It is the responsibility of everyone, of every South Sudanese who cares about the well-being and future of his and her country, to demand equal rights for women. If your neighbors do not allow their daughter to go to school, ask them why not. If there is no girls’ sports program at your school, take the lead and help create one. If women are unemployed in your community, sit down and create a plan together that will provide employment opportunities. If women are rallying for peace in your community, then get up and march with them. Come up with a solution together, as a community, as a country, as a people. South Sudan did not win its independence by being half-way involved in its struggle for liberty. Likewise, South Sudan will not advance as a nation if it is only half-way involved in its struggle for women's rights.

In the words of Miss World South Sudan, Manuela Modong, “Remember, in every challenge there is a treasure and there is no limit to life.” I encourage you, as one nation, to meet the challenge of educating, empowering, and joining women in the struggle for equality. In doing so, South Sudan will find a treasure of peace and prosperity.