

Churches and mosques in South Sudan boost women's participation

A five-year program funded by the Netherlands aims to increase the visibility of women in South Sudan and three other countries



Southern Sudanese women near the town of Rajaf. (Photo by SAM MEDNICK/AP)

Augustine Passilly, Sudan, *La Croix International*, 28 July 2021

The road to gender equality in South Sudan is still quite long.

In the world's youngest nation, which just recently celebrated its tenth anniversary of independence, only four out of every ten women can read.

The ratio for men is six out of ten.

In this landlocked country in east-central Africa, sexual violence against women is often used as a weapon of war.

And despite a 2018 peace agreement, deadly inter-communal conflicts continue in several regions.

These disparities and violence are found even within the confines of religious communities.

As a result, the Episcopal, Adventist, Presbyterian and Pentecostal churches, as well as the Islamic Council of Southern Sudan, have adopted a five-year plan to increase the visibility of women and improve their access to decision-making positions.

It is expected that other groups, including the Catholic Church, will join them in the coming months.

This initiative is part of the Young Women for Awareness, Agency, Advocacy and Accountability program, known as "YW4A".

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs is funding this program, which is also underway in Egypt, Palestine and Kenya.

The goal in South Sudan is to enhance "the leadership of 17,540 young women to effectively engage in collective action and decision-making in public, private, and civic spaces".

Women's rights champions

In Juba, the fledgling country's capital, an inaugural workshop was held on July 7 and 8.

Each of the faith communities sent four "women's rights champions".

In all, some 20 mixed gender spokespersons agreed to promote gender equality, drawing on each other's experiences.

"Women's participation in decision-making is more advanced in the Christian churches than in Islam," said Arafa Juma, the 40-year-old head of the South Sudan Islamic Council's secretariat for the social protection of women and children.

"Some churches tend to group members of the same tribe together. This can weaken the voice of Christian women while the unity of Muslim women gives them more weight," she said.

Nyakong Gabriel, a 20-year-old law student, represents the Episcopal Church. "Women are very involved in the life of the Church, such as taking care of fundraising," said this young "champion of women's rights".

"But there are too few women who lead churches. For example, there's a very limited number of women pastors," she pointed out.

Gabriela said she's capable of "serving God in the same way that men do".

She'd like to eventually become her church's choir director, a position that has always been reserved to men.

Involving young men

"The methodology for empowering women will be developed over time," said Peter Malir Biar, director of the Christian Agency for Peace and Development, an NGO responsible for leading the YW4A project in South Sudan.

He said the program is particularly aimed at young people since they are "the most likely to bring about institutional change".

Participants will hold daily sessions through WhatsApp groups, and will hold quarterly and annual gatherings in person.

These will allow the emergence of new tools, such as "spaces within religious institutions for women to freely discuss among themselves issues of inequality", said Malir Biar.

But Gabriel warned that the program must also include "education for young men, encouraging them to allow women to take on decision-making positions".