

This personal account is the first in a series on the 'Go to School' initiative in South Sudan. The series will showcase the initiative through text, video, and photos.

The Precious Chance to Go to School

By Isabella Kitari Feliciano



Isabella Kitari Feliciano, 18, is a student at Comboni Secondary School in Juba, Southern Sudan, and a leader in the local chapter of the Girls' Education Movement (GEM), which consists of groups of children and young people in schools and communities throughout Africa working to bring about positive change in the lives of African girls. GEM has been active in the 'Go to School' initiative, launched on 1 April 2006 by the Government of Southern Sudan with support from donors, UNICEF, UN agencies, NGOs and communities, which aims to enroll 1.6 million out of school children by the end of 2007. The initiative includes provision of essential materials for teachers and students, social mobilization efforts,

development of learning spaces and teacher training to improve the quality of education as well as support to the public sector to manage the education system.

Less than two years ago, I spent my schooldays wondering if I would have to run from the classroom to escape shooting outside.

Today I am eighteen years old, in my first year of secondary school. And instead of worrying about bullets, I am raising my voice on behalf of other young people in Southern Sudan.

I live in Juba – a town that saw a lot of fighting during the war. Life was very difficult then. Many of us died. People couldn't even walk across the main bridge for fear of being beaten by soldiers. There were bombs everywhere. Soldiers would harass us, searching our bags, saying that they were looking for explosives. Landmines kept us at home because we were afraid to walk around the town.

I remember a day when we weren't allowed to go to a prayer meeting unless we were accompanied by an armed soldier.

What kind of childhood is it when you can't even go to church without a gun?

The shooting stopped here after a peace agreement was signed in January 2005. Peace means that we don't have to be afraid to go outside. It means that schools aren't closed when violence breaks out.

But for my neighbors and for my country, there is still a long way to go. The war has made us poor. Many children in the villages don't go to school because they can't pay school fees. These children are mostly girls – because people think girls don't need education, and because they think that a girl's destiny is just to be a wife.

I don't see things that way.

There are so few girls who complete their education here. Only one girl in a hundred even finishes primary school. But I am going to school so I can gain the knowledge that will help me rebuild my country. When I grow up, I want to become a lawyer so I can oppose the things that are wrong – in Southern Sudan and in the whole world.

I want to change all the things that keep girls out of school. I want to change the fact that girls have to get married even if they're just twelve or thirteen. I want to make sure that girls don't leave school because they get pregnant.

I want to make sure that no-one laughs at a girl because she is menstruating and doesn't have the money she needs to buy sanitary supplies. I want to make sure that girls like these don't say, "it is better for me not to go to school."

This year, I have become involved with the Girls' Education Movement (GEM), which teaches us how to become advocates for ourselves and for other children. I've learned how to speak in public about the importance of education.

I used to be shy. But through GEM, this year I participated in the launch of the Go To School initiative and even sang in front of the President of Southern Sudan. In front of so many people, I called out, "Good morning Southern Sudan, let all children go to school!"

I learned that day that my voice is strong and powerful. Now I want to use my voice to help other children go to school. I want to tell the world that education should be free; that it is the right of every child.

I want the world to know that we are grateful for peace, but that we are eager for much more. We need teachers who will encourage our spirits. We need schools that have desks and chairs; food to keep us from hunger; uniforms, shoes and school supplies.

June 16th is the Day of the African Child. It commemorates a time when thousands of children in South Africa marched in the streets to protest discrimination and demand equality in education.

Today marks 30 years since that march in Soweto. I'm glad that I can be part of a tradition of young people working for justice. And I'm proud that today, my voice is strong enough to join in the calls for change.