

The reality of GBV: The story of a South Sudanese girl child in Kenya

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During the “I Am My Mother’s Wildest Dream” East Africa book tour, strangers shared their stories with us, and soon we learned that my story is not mine alone; it is a reflection of others’ stories and our society as a whole. Most of the stories we have heard fall into one of the following categories: child marriage, ghost marriage, lack of girl child education, or gender-based violence. Regardless of how little they shared, the pain was the same, and they were all asking for more out of life. “I Am My Mother’s Wildest Dream” shines a light on a misogynistic culture that has kept many people in the dark, and people are beginning to speak up and out against it. Sooner or later, we will be forced to listen and rewire our thoughts on the future of the South Sudanese girl child.

Below is a story of a young South Sudanese girl from Nairobi, Kenya, at our first book launch:

“Today, I accepted the unfathomable reality that I have been rejected. I’ve tried so many times to further my education by applying for not one or two scholarships but twenty! And guess what? I was rejected by all the institutions. Sometimes I wonder if I deserve this type of rejection or if it’s just how life is. Life has perpetually humbled me to the point where sometimes I cry my eyes out. Other times I sit dumbfounded before retreating to a quiet place to get my mind in check so as not to go crazy. Still, other times, I just keep quiet and let the storm pass. No matter what path I decide to take, I can’t help but ask myself, “Where is my silver lining?” I haven’t seen it, so I’ve decided that luck is not on my side.

Do not get me wrong, it’s not that I feel entitled or that I think I am more deserving than others; it’s just that I really wish things would work out for me, just for once. I have an insatiable craving to join a university and earn a degree like most other people. However, a year ago, I reduced my expectation of earning an undergraduate degree to settling for a diploma. I began taking various training courses and received several certificates. During that time, I learned that even a certificate is worth a lot more than just sitting at home waiting on well-wishers and do-gooders to help me get back into school.

“What is your plan if education doesn’t work for you?” they asked. “It is good to have several plans in life,” they said. The thing is, education was my only plan, but instead, I found myself seated listening to my aunties plant the idea of marriage inside my head. It’s not just any ordinary marriage; it’s a Western world kind of marriage. You know the kind with a wedding gown, ring, a possible visa, and to top it all off, my potential husband would be a Europe-based South Sudanese man. The age or age difference is never really considered; the major requirement is for the man to be well-loaded.

I am against the “Bride for Sale” idea, but if you are a South Sudanese girl like me, then you are well aware that your life decisions are not yours to make. Especially when your uncles and aunts join forces and pitch a very compelling get-rich-quick scheme to your parents. So, I watched as they created a Facebook account because previously, I did not have one, or rather, I did not see the need to have one. At the time, I was oblivious to the fact that it was the market where bridal auctioning happens.

After my Facebook account was created, a professional photo shoot ensued. After all, suitors cannot buy what they cannot see. My not-so-bare yet still tantalizing photos with eye-catching captions made their intended rounds on social media. Of course, my family was careful not to make it obvious that this was a quest to find me a wealthy husband. However, their plan worked! One after the other, the thirsty men fell into their intricately woven trap. These men began asking for my hand in marriage, but unbeknownst to them, the goal was to bag as much money as possible. So, those who came to negotiate with nothing but love and a few coins were immediately blocked. The young men who were recent graduates from university yet had no jobs were also rejected. And to make it worse, the men residing in Juba were told they had nothing to offer.

Being from a well-known reputable family makes the “sale” more expensive and increases the number of suitors. In addition, your height and beauty double the price. If you can cook, know your role as a wife, not talk back, stay indoors, cover yourself in a respectable manner, and hide all your allowances from other men, then you are the jackpot! Lastly, keeping the “yolk” intact only for the chosen one makes you even more desirable and increases your value.

I hated every single part of this marriage tradition, but speaking up would indicate that my mother did not raise me well. It would also earn her backlash and a few blue and black beatings, and I could not let that happen. The auction intensified and expanded to TikTok! My family members recorded me live carrying out tasks. I was instructed to do things like cooking kop, wal-wal, kisra, mula kombo, and many other traditional foods. They say the greatest way to a man’s heart is through the stomach, but I didn’t want anything to do with a man, let alone being in his heart. I wanted to be like fingernails on a chalkboard so he would reject me and save me from this misery.

Eventually, the auctioneers gave their bids, and I was sold to the highest bidder – an eighty-year-old man. He had sons and daughters older than myself and needed someone to take care of him in his old age. Regardless of age and health status, he ticked off the qualifications of being rich, living in Europe, and the other things my family had decided on.

The wedding took place when he arrived at Kakuma

Refugee Camp. When I tell you this man couldn’t even stand without aid, I mean exactly that! But money made my family members blind, deaf, and even mute, so I was disposed of.

After the wedding, I was taken to my husband’s house, and that is where I now reside. My biggest task and challenge is taking care of him under extreme scrutiny from his five older wives and children. They all constantly remind me without fail that I was disposed of and should never have high expectations of my life changing. My relatives only pick up my calls to ask me when I will be sending them money. I cannot complain because I am not allowed to. And I should laugh through my misery since a rich man’s joke is always funny. I find no purpose in living.

Sadly, this is a reality for most of the South Sudanese girls who have either not gone to school or have stopped schooling for various reasons such as lack of school fees. The uncles and aunts will not help clear your fees but will have the audacity to find you a husband. Your parents will not see the injustices done to you because of the bragging rights they will obtain in society as a result of your marriage. Your siblings will not speak up for you because they will now enjoy the privileges of rubbing shoulders with the rich. You are given just enough to ensure you do not think outside the box and find out that it is a scheme, a charade, and that you will be dependent on the husband and his family for the rest of your life. Your rights are now limited by he who holds your power.

So, my question is, what if God had given me just one scholarship? Would my life be less than the hell I am currently living? Rejection is redirection, they say, but I wish I was redirected to a classroom in a university which would groom me to become a lawyer so that I can fight the injustices thrown at me and the female gender at large by dystopia.”

This is one girl’s story, but she is not alone. As a society, we have been called to do better because we know better. Around the world, we have seen young girls grow up to become politicians, lawmakers, teachers, doctors and businesswomen. Why not your daughter, sister, niece, or cousin? Instead of serving tea under a mango tree and waiting for a man to ask for her hand in marriage, you can help her dream big. The sky is no longer the limit, but for them, reaching for the sky is good enough.