

## South Sudan says violence against women “obstacle to development’

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December 3, 2012 (JUBA) - South Sudan's Deputy Minister of Gender, Child and Social Welfare said Sunday that violence against women is one of the major contributing obstacles to the country's development

Priscilla Joseph Kuch described violence against women as an abuse of human rights, pledging that her ministry would take necessary corrective measures to remedy situation and to restore trust and confidence in the country.

The Minister of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, she said, has drawn up programs aiming at educating the general public, including the seventh annual 16 days of activism against gender based violence in South Sudan.

This year's campaign is the second since South Sudan seceded from Sudan in July 2011. Kuch said that this year her ministry "devised new ways to utilise the campaign to bring about transformative change."

In a consultative meeting with women activists on Sunday ministers admitted that despite increased awareness, women in South Sudan continue to experience violence in alarming numbers.

The 16 days of campaign is a global event but in South Sudan the theme was chosen to address issues specific to the young nation calling for the "Promotion of peace at home in order to Stop Gender Based Violence and Ending Child Marriage".

South Sudan began taking part in the annual 16 days of activism in 2006 when the ministry of gender, child and social welfare launched the country's first Special Protection Unit (SPU) for women at Malakia Police Station in Juba.

The opening was marked by a march involving a police band, women, school children, government Staff, UN Agencies, NGO's and other activists. The unit was opened by the former Minister Mary Kiden Kimbo.

Although South Sudan's 2008 Child Act puts marrying age at 18 years for girls and requires the consent of both parties, reports of teenage marriages are common. Three girls in Lakes State and two in Jonglei State are reported to have killed because of refusing to accept arranged marriages.

Cases related to individuals taking the law into their hands continue to emerge while women stay in police custody for long periods before trials are made. Domestic violence is another area when women rights are often violated.

Kuch pledged South Sudan's readiness to ratify international laws and treaties including the Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Violence against Women (CEDAW), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The official further stated that Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), though not common in the country, is an additional and dangerous form of violence inflicted on girls, adding that it is sometimes used as a rite of passage. She lamented that in some societies, babies as young as seven days old undergo FGM, while some women are forced to undergo FGM when they marry into cultures which have adopted these practices, resulting in serious health problems for the individual.

"These health programs are recommended as part of efforts to eliminate these customs. Sexual harassment is yet another form of violence. These are unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature," she stressed.

Both physical and psychological violence against women have profound implications for a woman's health and empowerment.

"A battered woman who has suffered bodily harm cannot participate in various activities. A young girl who is forced to marry an older man of a different generation will be faced with continuous adjustments due to the mismatch in age which may impede her opportunities for development," she pointed out.

Minister Kuch added that the media, NGOs, the government and other institutions all had a role to play in preventing violence against women.

South Sudan's government, she said, supports building the capacity of the country's security forces so they can properly manage alleged cases of gender based violence. Kuch also advocated for a database on to track levels of violence against women and the provision of reproductive health kits for victims during humanitarian crisis.

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