

# Transforming the society



*Nasike Najiye was badly beaten and whipped after she ran away from a forced marriage. She experienced violence from both her family and the middle-aged man she was forced to marry. Photo: Okello Dennis*

*Gender based violence is terrible common in the Toposa culture. JOIN Good Forces and the Health Clinic in Kuron now works hand in hand to change people's mindset about violence against women.*

**By: Miriam Hagen**

Women in the Toposa culture get sold for marriages for an average of 30-60 cows, and the brides can be down to 12 years old. Once a man has paid the cows, the woman is his property and he can do whatever he wants with her. He is allowed to beat her, and even the girls own family will beat her if she resists staying with the man. JOIN Good Forces started a project to prevent and counsel cases of gender based violence in January this year. So far 17 men, mainly chiefs of the villages, have undergone training to create an awareness of how the women are suffering. Additionally 6 women are trained as counselors and they serve 18

villages in Kuron area. Since the project started, 225 couples have received counseling, 59 families forcing marriages have been counseled and 26 victims of rape have received treatment and counseling.

### **Forced marriage**

Nasike Najiye from the picture above is one of the women who have received help. She came to the clinic a few months ago after she had been very badly beaten. We met her in the village, and she looked physically healthy again.



*Nasike Najiye(right) received counseling by Cilia Napuke (left) and the Health Clinic in Kuron. She was badly whipped and beaten by her husband, but today her situation has improved and she looks physically healthy again. Photo: Miriam Hagen*

“I am ok again,” she said with a shy smile.

Nasike Najiye, which is estimated to be about 16 years old, became pregnant with the man she loves, but her parents did not approve of the relationship. Instead she was forced to marry a middle-aged chief in Kuron area, which offered many cows as a bride’s price. Nasike tried to run back to the father of her baby, but then she was badly beaten by both her family and her new husband. After the beating, she refused to eat, and when she came to the clinic, she had not eaten for three days.

### **Beating stopped**

Health Coordinator and Clinical Officer Okello Dennis tells that he became aware of this girl through a workshop for men.

“One of the men said `I have realized that I am forcing someone to marry me and I have beaten her. She is in my village now.` He accepted to get counselling,” Okello said.

Okello found the girl in a very bad condition, and she was admitted to the hospital for two days. After receiving counselling, she started to eat again and she also reconciled with her husband.

“Is he treating you well now?”

Nasike laughed and looked down. She refused to reply even though both the counselor and the interpreter encouraged her to speak. She mumbled that she is starting to forget about the father of the baby. Cecilia Napuke concluded;

“She is happy now. She is living freely and she is at the moment being treated better.”

### **Long process**

For someone coming from a culture where women choose freely who to marry and are also free to file for a divorce, this success story seems confusing.

“Do you think this is a success story?”

“He is treating her fair now, but the forcing is still there. It will be a long process, because she does not like him. She is trying to adjust to the situation,” Okello said.

“But forced marriages are against the Human Rights?”

“Yes.”

“What is your goal when you counsel a couple like this?”

“We try to be very neutral and to promote dialogue. We get the story from the man and woman separately. Then they meet together and we try to mediate between them.”

“So, no matter what they decide, you have to accept?”

“We have to accept, but we tell them the bad effects of violence and forced marriage.”

“So, in this particular case, this was the best you could hope for?”

“She is not being beaten, that is a good thing.”





*Health Coordinator and Clinical Officer, Okello Dennis, would love to see the living conditions of the Toposa women getting improved. However, he cannot enforce it, so he realizes that this work will take time. Photo: Miriam Hagen*

### **Early pregnancies**

Girls are given out for marriage from the age of 12, even though the national law in South Sudan sets 18 years as the legal age for marriage and sexual intercourse. Okello tells that the Health Clinic works actively on informing the society about the dangers of early age pregnancies.

“You can have so many complications, and you can even die. The girl’s body is not prepared to carry that heavy load, and she can also suffer from Fistula.”

“What do you think the age limit for pregnancy should be?”

“The national standard is 18, so we cannot go below that,” he replied.

“Are any legal actions taken against these early marriages?”

“Here? No. There is no law enforcement here. If there are any problems, people go to the chiefs. The offender has to give cows or receive beating.”

Okello explains that during the training of the men, they seemed to understand the health risks attached to early pregnancies.

“Before they would say `this is our culture, this is how we do it,` but now they have realized. They promised to change and convince the others,” he said.

### **Back to school**

After some thinking, Okello realizes that one of his cases had a better outcome than Nasike Najiye’s story. A girl, who claims to be 12 years old, was taken to a man, but he could not pay as many cows as the parents wanted. She was then sent to another man, but he was old and she did not like him. She ran away from him and hid in the bush for three months, before she approached some friends in St. Thomas Primary School in Holy Trinity Peace Village, Kuron. She was sent to the Health Clinic, but her parents found out where she was and claimed her back so she could marry a third man. After some mediation, they agreed to stop beating her, but they still insisted on forcing her to marry this man. The girl ran away again, and this time the Clinic hid her for two days.

“We were hiding her because the parents wanted to beat her again,” Okello explained.

They arranged for mediation between the girl and her parents, and finally the parents agreed to let her take education before giving her away.

“I said to the parents `School is good. She will study and become someone important.` They allowed her, and she is now in school,” Okello said and smiled.

### **In darkness**

Cecilia Napuke has undergone training as a counselor in JOIN Good Forces’ program. She has gained new insights through this work.

“The training has helped us. We were in darkness. Men relax all day while women dig and do all the work. If we join together, we will have enough food. It will take time for the men to understand, but slowly, slowly...”

“How is the counselling received by the community? “

“Some say `yes, beating is not good,` while others are stubborn. The women are their property, they say.”

“Do they pay attention to your message?”

“Yes, we are respected. We are called doctors. People say we are allowed to talk.”

### **Alcohol increases violence**

The six female counsellors meet to report new cases and to get a briefing every Friday. Every month they get soap and 1 kilo sugar as an appreciation of their work. They have also received rubber boots, umbrella and torches so they can move freely between the villages in all kinds of weather. It has only been four months since the project started, but Cecilia Napuka has already seen some changes.

“The cases have reduced, but when people drink alcohol – then they are getting problems. We tell them that when you drink, you should not fight your woman.”

The common types of alcohol in the Toposa culture is Sorghum beer and Sicko, which is a very strong, locally made liquor. At times the Toposa’s can drink very heavily.

Okello tells that the area they are operating in is very big, and they are therefore going to expand the project with the funding they receive from JOIN Good Forces. Next year 20 men and 20 women will be trained. This time a man and a woman will work hand in hand in each village.

“At this time we are missing many cases because of the few counselors, but after that training we will reach even more people,” Okello said.