

# Free to choose her husband

*9 year old Nakai Narika was «booked» to marry an older man when she was only three years old. Thanks to JOIN Good Forces's project, the parents have now promised that she is free to choose her husband.*



*9 year old Nakai Narika has been promised that she can choose her own husband. This is the first time Health Coordinator and Clinical Officer Okello Dennis hear about such a thing in the Toposa tribe in South Sudan.*

**Text and photo: Miriam Hagen**

Nakai Narika knew her destiny very early. When she was only three years old, she was “booked” to marry a friend of her family. The Toposa tribe in South Sudan are pastoralists, and women are traded for cows. The family usually receives 30 to 60 cows for a young girl, and in many cases they are given to quite old chiefs, who have many cows and wives. The girls are down to 11 years old when they are sent for marriages. They have no saying in it. If they refuse to be with the man physically, the women in the village will hold them down so the man can do what he wishes with the girl. Women are whipped with the same whip used on cows. If they run back to their family of origin, they also get beaten because the family has already received cows as payment for the marriage.

**Chooses for herself**

Nakai Narika was going to be one of these women, but thanks to JOIN Good Forces’s project in the Holy Trinity Peace village in Kuron, her life has been changed. Her father is a chief, and he was among 17 men who received training in June last year. The training aims to show the physical and psychological harm early age marriages create. When we met Nakai Narika in her village this week, she was graining sorghum flour. She was carrying herself proudly, and big colourful jewellerys of plastic pearls showed that she is a young Toposa woman. Her parents have told her that she can marry whoever she wants, and she is very relieved.

“I was not happy that I was going to marry an older man. I am glad that I can choose for myself. If they try to force me now, I will refuse,” she said.



*Grandmother Nakale Napeyok and 9 year old Nakai Narika agree that it is best for a woman to choose her own spouse. That is a very unusual point of view in the Toposa culture in South Sudan.*

## Bad tradition

The face of her grandmother is mild and her eye contact is direct. She told that men can book babies.

“If the mother is a good person, they assume that the daughter will be at least as good. Therefore they want to make sure that they will marry her,” she explained.

“How do you feel about booking a little child for marriage?”

“It is not good. A child should grow up in her own family first. This has been the tradition here, but now we have realised that it is not good,” Grandmother Nakala Napeyok said.

She uses her arms actively – she points in different directions and then up to the sky.

“Several children have died from us because of marriage in young age. They are not strong enough to be wives. This is the way it has been,” she said. She pointed at her grandchild.

“When she is older, she shall choose her own husband. If anyone suggest for marriage, he must talk to her. We will let her choose, we will ask her opinion,” she stated.



*Health Coordinator and Clinical Officer Okello Dennis is happy that Nakai Narika gets to choose her own spouse. It is the first time he hears about this in the Kuron area, and he hopes that the JOIN Good Forces project will continue the three planned years so one can see lasting results in many families.*

## **Girls are whipped**

Health Coordinator Okello Dennis, who leads JOIN Good Forces's project in Kuron, tells that this story is very unique.

"It is the first time I hear about that a girl can choose her own spouse in this area," he said.

Since the project started in June last year, the clinic has counselled 285 couples for domestic violence. 31 victims of rape have received help, and 51 cases of forced marriages have been counselled. 298 patients have received medical treatment after domestic violence.

"What types of violence do you see?"

"Whipping. Girls and women are whipped when they do not obey the orders of the men."

"Are they always whipped or are there other kinds of domestic violence?"

"No, they are whipped."

"Do you see many physical injuries after rape?"

"Yes, it is also there."

Altogether 373 patients have received medical treatment and psycho social treatment after violence since the project started.



*12 year old Napoche Lochim Paolim was brought home from a forced marriage with an older man after her parents received training through JOIN Good Forces's project in June last year.*

## **Taken home**

The life of 12 year old Napoche Lochim Paolim has also changed through JOIN's project. She

was sent for marriage with an older man when she was 11 years old. Her father is a chief, and he was one of the 17 men who received training. Her mother is one of 6 women who are educated as councillors. After the training they realised that it was wrong to send such a young girl for marriage. They went and brought her back to their home.

“She had been with the man for only one month and we had not received the cows yet. We realised that it was not good to send such a young girl, so we brought her home,” said the father, Polino Lochim.

“How long will you wait before you send her for marriage?”

“We will give her for marriage when she is that old,” the father said and pointed at a 24 year old nurse. He added on saying.

“We will not give her to the same man, he is too lazy. He did not care enough to bring her to the clinic when she was sick. We had to go and help her ourselves,” the father said.

### **Older than her father**

We turned to 12 year old Napoche and asked how she felt about being sent for marriage at such a young age. She looked down and mumbled, while her foot was playing with the foot of the table. She said that there was a problem with the husband, but she refused to say more. The mother took over and talked.

“She did not get enough food, and the co wives did not behave well towards her. She was the youngest of five wives. He did not take her to the clinic when she was sick,” she explained.



*Polino Lochim, the father of the 12 year old girl, promises that the girls will remain in their home for many years before she is sent for marriage. However, to let her choose her future husband is unheard of in the Toposa culture. Nurse assistant Gale Rose Milla notes down the story being told in the “Listening house”.*

“Was this man very old?”

“He was older than me,” said the father. He looks like he is in his late 50’s.

“Will you let Napoche choose who she wants to marry the next time?”

“No, I cannot approve of that. I must know his background. I am the one to choose, not the girl,” the father said.

### **Well received**

Health Coordinator Okello Dennis said that this story is very unique. Of the 51 cases of forced marriages they have counselled, very few girls have been released from the marriage.

“Most of them remain in the forced marriage, also after the counselling, he said.

In most cases, reduction of violence is the best one can hope for, but Okello still see a change of attitude. The program where six women are counselling people in 18 villages, have been well received.

“I am glad that the community has accepted the program and is willing to change. Women have been suppressed for very long now, and if we can start to see some level of gender equality, it would be good,” he said and added.

“If you look at the time the program has been implemented, which is just above half a year, we have already seen some positive changes.”

“How long will it take before we see lasting changes?”

“If we implement the program for the three years that have been decided, we can realise a very big change,” he believes.

**Will advise others**

Grandmother Nakale Napeyok who has completely changed her opinion and will let her grandchild choose her own husband, are going to advise others who want to send their daughters for marriage at a very young age.

“I hope I can give advice to other families. I will ask why they are in such a hurry to send their daughter. Do they need food or cows? What is their problem?”

Before we left the village, she turned to the medical staff. She could see that they brought a journalist to write about the project and she wondered what the donor is thinking.

“How many years will you continue this program,” she said and looked at them with begging eyes. The life of her grandchild will be different from hers, but it still needs a lot of work before the changes reaches the whole community.