“History and hope: Education in South Sudan”

A webinar for Black History Month at The Open University

11 October 2023

Copy edited transcript of the webinar

(The text is faithful to the webinar but some minor changes in wording have been made for clarity and the practicalities of running the webinar have been removed.)

Jaspal Singh:

Thank you very much. Welcome everybody to the second week of our Black History Month ‘saluting our sisters’ celebration at the Open University. My name is Jaspal Singh. I'll be hosting the session. The session is called *History and hope: education in South Sudan*” and we have three speakers here with us today who will in a moment introduce themselves. Let me just say that this session will be recorded.

You can put your questions into the chat while the speakers are speaking. And I also wanted to point you to the ground rules slide that Babette has kindly shared right at the top of the chat. If you could just have a quick look at that. So it just lays out the ground rules.

Jean Hartley:

Welcome everybody. Fidele and I are co chairing this session, so we both warmly welcome you to this session. We have prepared some areas to talk about in relation to history and hope in South Sudan but we're also interested in your questions and we'll have two points in the webinar where there'll be an opportunity to ask questions.

Today, 11th of October is also the United Nations International Day of the Girl. So in a way, we've got a double celebration of saluting our sisters.

What we're going to do in this seminar is look at a bit of a paradox: South Sudan, which became independent in 2011. Formerly, it was part of Sudan. It's got really strong and rich links with the UK, partly because it was a a former colony of the British and also the Egyptians. And yet it seems to be one of those countries which in the UK we seem to know least about. It's an important part of East Africa, but a lot of people mix it up with Sudan, and people aren’t quite sure where it is and so on. So there's a rich history and also there's an active diaspora in the UK. They themselves estimate that there's about 7000 people who came to the UK from either what was then Sudan or the southern part of Sudan (currently South Sudan), as refugees and in various ways. So this is an opportunity to learn a bit more about the South Sudan. And we're going to do it in two ways. One is thinking about its history but setting that in the context of education more broadly in East Africa. We're going to reflect on the historical neglect of South Sudan, and that's the history part. But we will also explore sources of hope by looking at a particular school which is increasingly being seen as

a beacon school for the whole country and which is providing a lot of inspiration and hope for people both inside and outside the country.

So first of all, where is South Sudan? I mentioned it became independent in 2011 and it is the land which was previously part of Sudan. South Sudan is also part of East Africa, sitting just north of Uganda, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

When we hear about the history, we will hear about the whole country and when we look at the school, we will be focusing on a school in the southwest of the country, not that far from the place on the map called Yambio. Fidele is going to talk about some experiences of education in East Africa and both of his countries are a bit south of South Sudan.

The hope part of our webinar is going to be about Ibba Girls Boarding School in South Sudan and the idea that education can actually spell hope so that even in the most difficult circumstances, having educated boys, educated girls, educated adults (who maybe didn't get education due to conflict and displacement), it's a really important part of providing hope for a nation.

Ibba Girls Boarding School covers both primary and secondary education. It takes girls from the class of Primary Four and then takes girls right through to the end of secondary school. So approximately ages 10 to 18.

We want to hear from you as we talk, so do put ideas or suggestions in the chat and be ready for some discussion a bit further into the webinar, but for now I'm really pleased to be able to hand over to Fidele who's going to reflect on education in East Africa to set the scene for this in South Sudan.

Fidele.Mutwarasibo:
I am delighted to welcome everybody who is here who has joined us today. I've never been to South Sudan, I have to confess, but I'm going to talk about my experience with education in East Africa. I'm originally from Rwanda, part of my education journey took me to Kenya. And those are the experiences I will be reflecting upon, bearing in mind that the theme for the month this year is celebrating our sisters. I'm not a sister. Obviously. I will try as much as I can to incorporate the sisters in what I am going to say. So to set off: when I started primary school long, long, long time ago, we had mixed schools - we had girls and boys. I attended two primary schools and I have to say yes, we had girls but in comparison we had more boys than girls. And I'll be reflecting as to why this might be the case. After two primary schools not too far away from where I was born and grew up, I went to secondary school and I attended three secondary schools. Interestingly enough, all the schools I attended were boys' schools. It was because at the time if you went to a publicly-funded school you had either to go to a boys school or a girls school. So I happened to go to boys schools. Having said that, the year I was doing the equivalent of GCSE we had a few girls who came to the school I was attending, but I was only there for a year and then I left and went somewhere else.

I went to Kenya subsequently and surprise, surprise, because I was doing a subject which is male orientated - I was doing forestry - we had a few girls on the course but most of the participants were boys. So the story I've told you so far is drawing up a few lessons which I want to discuss and share with you.

In my society, which was patrilineal, we have a man who's at the centre of the universe. The education of girls was not prioritised. There may have been some families like mine, for example, where we prioritised the education of both boys and girls. Around us, everybody was encouraged to go to school, but my family approach encouraging all children’s education was an exception rather than the rule.

The other big challenge for the girls was the fact that there were very few role models for the girls. So in other words, if their mothers were not educated, the girls were unlikely to have women role models in their family or in the teaching profession at the time.

There were more men teachers than women, so therefore there were no models at home and there were very few role models at school. Having said that, when I went to secondary school it was different because we had teachers, both men and female, although there were many men among them. But compared to primary school, I counted more women teachers in secondary school than I did in primary school.

I should also mention that one of the lessons I took from there was the gendered nature of education pathways. In other words, if you think about it, my secondary school specialised in agriculture, although it is the women who are working a lot on the farms. But it was many more men than women who attended those kind of schools. In fact, at the time we had three to four agricultural schools in the country when I was in secondary school but only one of the four was for girls. And the same would be said about people who looked at things like engineering and so on, where there were mainly men. So again, going back to the whole idea of separation between boys and girls, prioritisation of education of boys over girls, but also the fact that we had those divisions where, for example, there were expectations that an engineer or a builder would be a man and not a woman and so forth. It was not based on facts or people being able to do things or not being able to do it but was just based on that assumption of gender difference. It was sometimes tradition, but also what has gone on before.

So I have been asking myself as I was preparing today, has anything changed? I'm aware that I have not been to Africa for a long time, and maybe when I go I'll be surprised. Things might have changed, but sometimes as things change, sometimes they remain the same. Some of my thoughts about these matters is that a key issue is that if you think about educating a society, I would see educating girls as educating a village and I see educating boys as educating individual persons. And I'm saying this, bearing in mind that, obviously, if there were no female role models at home, in schools and community for girls even the boys who might have had role male models sometimes lost them when the role models migrated from villages to towns. Nevertheless, the boys could at least associate education with migration and sometimes better paid jobs.

We know there are complexities around how the families are formed now, but I'm just thinking of the family in the context of where I was at the time. So it meant if you had normal role models at home because your father had left and gone somewhere else, you did not necessarily miss out on education. You missed out on being motivated to study, and that's why I have a very strong view in terms of why we should invest in educating women, because if we do it, we are not only educating individuals, we are educating the wider society rather than the individuals. (The assumption here being that the women at the time were less expected to migrate and could serve as both role models to their sons and daughters in addition to helping out with the homework).

This is something which I feel very strongly about. Yes, in some households (including my own one), everybody got a chance to get educated. But this was not the norm everywhere. And when there are scarce resources we know, sometimes they are prioritised, but they should not be prioritised for, you know, to spend on some members of society (male)]] while ignoring the others (female).

In my experience, those families who have educated girls, they left a mark. To illustrate the point I'm making is that when I was growing up,part of the reputation I had was that I had female family members who were educated, high achiever women relatives who rode bicycles, which was unusual then. So again it was because female members of my family, - female pioneers - who were enlightened (compared to other women) to the point of doing extraordinary things, such as riding a bike, and getting on and doing things (e.g. working in the formal economy). So we always look for pioneers, but let's prioritise everybody's education, including girls. Let's celebrate our sisters. And on that note, thank you very much.

Jean.Hartley:
Fidele, thank you very much indeed. I think that's a very heartfelt and very graphic sense about education in East Africa. So thank you.

We're now going to turn to Dame Rosalind Marsden. You'll see here that she was a former British ambassador to Sudan and has also worked for the European Union. She is a Fellow of Chatham House, attached to the Africa programme there and with expertise about Sudan and South Sudan. So she knows the country really well. I'll also add that she's a Trustee of Ibba Girls Boarding School that we will talk about in the second half of the webinar.

Rosalind knows the country really well, and so who better than to give us a sense of the history of education than Dame Rosalind?

Rosalind Marsden:
Thank you very much and hello everyone. it's a pleasure to take part in the webinar today.

To understand the education system in South Sudan, it's important to bear in mind the sheer size of the country. Before South Sudan seceded in 2011 and became an independent country, Sudan was the largest country in Africa. It was about 2/3 the

size of India, but with a population of only around 60 million people. Post-independence, South Sudan is still very large, with an area bigger than that of Kenya and Burundi put together, though with very few roads and with an estimated population of only between 12 and 14 million people.

It's also one of the poorest countries in the world and has a long history of internal conflict. Consequently, South Sudan still suffers from a low level of educational provision. An estimated 2.8 million children are out of school, about 70% of all school aged children in the country. More than 70% of the population above the age of 15 are illiterate, and for women the rate is estimated to be around 90%.

To understand how this situation came about, it's helpful to look at the historical context.

In the first half of the 20th century, from 1898, when Kitchener led the reconquest of the Sudan, (as it's known in British history) until 1956, Sudan, which included the territory of present-day South Sudan, was ruled by an Anglo-Egyptian colonial government called the Anglo-Egyptian condominium, in which Britain was the senior partner. For the first two decades of the colonial period, British forces fought wars of pacification in the south, a process that took longer than in the North. The British colonial authorities then sought to separate the predominantly Muslim, Arabic speaking northern part of the country from the South and for a number of years administered most of the South as "a closed district" to reduce the influence of Islam, the Arabic language, and northern Sudanese nationalist influences and, as British officials claimed at the time, to preserve the cultures of the southern peoples.

This difference in approach to North and South also applied to educational policy. Whereas in northern Sudan, the colonial authorities set up a government school system and established the Gordon Memorial College, which later became the University of Khartoum, in the South, they outsourced education to Christian missionaries. Christian missions were allowed to settle in the South to open schools and to carry out their evangelistic activities according to the geographical spheres of influence as defined by the Governor-General of the day, Francis Wingate. Italian Catholic missionaries established themselves in Bahr al Ghazal Province to the West, British Anglicans in Equatoria Ppovince to the South, and American Presbyterians in Upper Nile to the east. By and large, this geographical division amongst the different Christian denominations is still in existence today, as we see from the fact that President Salva Kiir is a Catholic, while his main political rival, Riek Machar, who comes from Upper Nile, is a Presbyterian.

By the 1930s, the colonial government had started to show more interest in southern education and began to hire their own personnel and invest their own resources in education. The system of education that emerged in the South was based on two types of schools: elementary schools that taught children in the local vernacular languages and provided education that was linked to the practical needs of the people, and intermediate schools in which English was the language of instruction and which aimed at training teachers, clerks and minor government officials. It was not until the last decade of the colonial period, from 1947 until Sudan's independence in 1956, that the British authorities gave up the so-called Southern

policy. In the educational field, this was a period of educational expansion and unification of the school curricula in North and South. But the distribution of educational provision was geographically uneven, with more schools concentrated in Equatoria compared to areas of Bahr al Ghazal and Upper Nile, the home areas of the predominantly Dinka and Nuer agro-pastoralist groups. The need for South Sudanese to take part in national decision-making in the run-up to independence - when Britain was competing with Egypt over the future of the country - also led to the establishment of southern Sudan's first secondary school in Rumbek in 1948, together with some agricultural, vocational and teacher training schools.

After Sudan's independence in 1956, church-run missionary schools were closed down, many of the foreign Christian missionaries were replaced by teachers from northern Sudan and Arabic became the medium of instruction. Rumbek Secondary School, which brought students together from all over the country to mix and learn from each other, became famous because many of its students went on to become leading national figures, including John Garang, South Sudan's most iconic leader.

The 1960s were years of political awakening for South Sudanese. From 1960, a series of strikes led by students at Rumbek Secondary School, spread to schools across the country, and many students, including John Garang, were expelled, although he later went on to complete his education in Tanzania and the United States.

But schools were inaccessible to much of the population, and educational opportunities became even more limited as a result of Sudan's long running civil wars between the northern and southern parts of the country from 1955 until 1972 and then again from 1983 until 2005. This meant that generations of South Sudanese went into the bush to join the rebellion and lost out on education. During the 10 years of the Southern Regional Government that followed the 1972 Peace Agreement, southern Sudan's first university was established in 1975. English was reintroduced as the language of instruction at secondary level, while intermediate and primary schools used a mixture of Arabic, English and vernacular languages.

Then after the 1989 coup that brought the Islamist government of Omar al Bashir to power in Khartoum, schools in government-held towns in southern Sudan again became the focus of a campaign by the National Islamic Front in Khartoum to impose Islamicization and Arabization. With the start of the Second Civil War in 1983, some young people moved out of southern Sudan to the bases of the Sudan People's Liberation Army, the SPLA, in Ethiopia, or fled to neighbouring countries to be educated in refugee camps. This war between the Bashir government in Khartoum and the SPLA led by Dr John Garang was one of the longest civil wars in history, with an estimated death toll of around 2 million. It was fought mainly in southern Sudan as well as in the Nuba mountains and Blue Nile.

After the war came to an end with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, and a new autonomous government was established in Southern Sudan, hundreds of new schools were built and there was a great demand for literacy classes for adults who had spent their lives fighting in the bush and who wanted to catch up with

the education that war had taken away. Oil revenue increased the amount of money available for education and the expanding education sector drove urbanisation.

But when South Sudan became independent after a referendum in 2011, it still had some of the worst human development indicators in the world. Educational challenges resulted from poverty, poor governance, health problems, overcrowded classrooms, lack of qualified teachers, many of whom had barely completed elementary education, and the low level of teachers' salaries, resulting often in teacher absenteeism. After independence in 2011, the Government of South Sudan decided to make English the preferred medium of instruction in schools. However, there was a shortage of teachers who could teach in English and of English language teaching materials. Those South Sudanese who had managed to get a better education were often those who had grown up in the refugee camps in Kenya or Uganda and attended schools run by international NGOs.

While all these challenges apply to students in South Sudan, girls face additional obstacles because of patriarchal cultural norms, pressure to marry at an early age and domestic responsibilities in the household. Because of widespread poverty, the dowry associated with marriage - the so-called bride price - can be an incentive for parents to marry off their daughters while they're still young, particularly in rural areas. Prioritisation of boys' education over that of girls often leads to girls being removed from school earlier, if a family cannot afford to send all their children to school. Insecurity can also be a deterrent, particularly if children have to travel a long way to school in rural areas and parents are afraid of their girls being attacked. So girls are more likely to be enrolled later and removed from primary school earlier than their male counterparts. South Sudan has one of the lowest female literacy rates in the world. Very few girls make the transition to secondary school. The secondary enrolment rate for girls in South Sudan is only 5%, compared to the average in sub-Saharan Africa of around 30%. But there are regional and gender disparities, which means that, in some parts of South Sudan, secondary enrolment is as low as 1% for girls. In 2017, it was estimated that less than 3,500 girls would complete all four years of secondary education. Because so few girls graduate from secondary school, it means that the number of those going into the professions is very small.

Liz Hodgkin, who at the age of 70 went to teach in a remote school in Eastern Equatoria state in South Sudan, provides a moving description in her book "*Letters from Isohe*" of the determination of the girls in her school to complete their education and to resist being pressured into early marriage. She also describes her admiration for the teachers who were dedicated to teaching the next generation, although they could barely survive on their salaries.

A peaceful and productive future for South Sudan depends very much on raising the enrolment rates for both boys and girls, improving the standards of education and training the leaders of the next generation. This is why a school like Ibba Girls Boarding School, which is a community school, not a private school, is so important in providing a safe space for girls from across Western Equatoria state to receive a high quality education.

The Friends of Ibba Girls School iare also now partnering with Windle Trust International, which has exceptional experience in raising the quality of education and teacher training in South Sudan, is helping to implement the UK-funded scheme to support girls education as well as having providing hundreds of university scholarships for South Sudanese refugees and internally displaced people for over 4 decades. You will hear more from Jean about Ibba Girls Boarding School later in the webinar. Thank you.

Jean Hartley
Great. Thank. Thank you very much indeed. Rosalind, that's fantastic. We're going to ask if there are any questions to either Rosalind or Fidele now.

Jaspal Singh:
There are two questions or comments for Fidele.
One questioner says fascinating Fidele. It is interesting how the skewed pupil attendance in schools - more boys than girls - did not seem to affect professional gender segregation.

The second questioner says thank you for this important talk. I was wondering if you could talk about any informal educational institutions which may have emerged to contest the colonial influences over educational institutions in East Africa or in South Sudan.

Fidele.Mutwarasibo:
In relation to the first question: Those few women who manage to go and study, because they are few, if they did not get those posh jobs in administration, the financial choice for them or their expected destination was to go into teaching, which obviously was not paying as much as the other jobs. So that could be the explanation as well as the holidays(an important consideration during the children raising period). If you think about the whole idea of having families and so forth, if you have the primary care, naturally teaching might be easier than taking up another job where you would have to make childcare arrangements.

Having said that, obviously when I was growing up, people often employed domestic workers at home. So if you are earning a wage, you could be able to afford to pay for those services, although there's sort of questionable choices to be made in terms of depriving somebody else's child of education, employing them to work for you. Hope things are different now.

Those are the kind of issues to consider (including employing domestic workers who should be otherwise be in school), so it’s very complex.

In relation to the second question, it's interesting. I think some of the things I have learned in life actually came through some informal education, which is not the norm anymore.

But some of my relatives who did not have a so-called formal education, those will be wise people who had been sharing their knowledge through the oral tradition,

through storytelling. In fact, if you follow some of my writing, I often refer to my grandmother or my grandmothers. They are the people who educated me most, although they did not necessarily have a teaching qualification. So yes, the alternative routes of education, it does not have to be the formal one. if it is using traditional oral history and storytelling. These are people (e.g.my grandmothers) who have less contact with a colonial or modern education, so to speak, and in fact, those family members who had encountered this 'modern education' had some sort of choice words for what they considered to be traditional (seeing them as backward traditions). So yes, I enjoyed living in two universes which were parallel as far as I was concerned, and I have always been happy to take a few positive things from formal education or modernity, while keeping my feet in tradition by benefiting from the wisdom of the people I met along the way. You can't believe how much you learn from people who don't necessarily have a teaching qualification. Thank you.

Jaspal.Singh:
Great. Thank you, Fidele. Jean, you now will talk about Ibba Girls Boarding School.

Jean Hartley:
Rosalind has given us a rather daunting picture of the history, the high levels of illiteracy, the disruption due to conflict and displacemen, the policy of neglect in some ways and the need to change and so on but we're going to move now from history to hope and focus on one particular school in South Sudan, which is actually attracting a lot of attention right across the country because it's very much seen as a beacon school, providing a real sense about what education could become in South Sudan. So, first I will show you a few photos of the school and tell you a little bit about it, and then we're going to salute our sisters in videos from two of the students from Ibba Girls Boarding School, and also the senior woman teacher. I hope they will really provide inspiration.

Here is some background about the school. It is a boarding school for 360 girls. It provides schooling from mid primary right through to the end of secondary because, as Rosalind has told us, a number of girls in South Sudan drop out due to early and forced marriage. The aim of this school is have, effectively, two schools on one campus so that girls can go directly from primary to secondary without dropout. Their parents are encouraged to ensure their daughters stay on, take secondary qualifications and then go on to further or higher education. The school is in Western Equatoria State, down in the southwest, one of the 10 states of South Sudan. The catchment area for the school is about the size of Scotland and so girls travel in from quite a long way away. It's therefore a boarding school, partly because of the catchment area and also to enable girls to study and to learn and to share their childhood without the pressures of domestic labour or the risk of early marriage. The school is aiming to provide good quality education, both academic education, but also practical education as well. So there's a school farm and all the students have to grow some of their own food to help in the running of the school. And there are other practical skills too.

Rosalind mentioned that this is a community school. It's for all, potentially - any girl student from across the state. It doesn't matter what background your parents have or what they can afford. This is a free school so that orphans and those from poor backgrounds can participate as well as others.

The school is designed to be environmentally sustainable. Water comes from a solar powered borehole. Electricity comes from solar power as well, and this makes it a very unusual school in South Sudan to have electricity and water. It also has satellite Internet as well, which safety for the school, but also means that girls and teachers can use the internet, for the teachers to develop lessons and for the girls to find academic resources.

This photo shows a well-furnished classroom, and although it looks like a pretty ordinary classroom, this is not so in South Sudan, many people are really astonished at this set up, partly because there are desks - many schools in South Sudan will not have any desks or any chairs at all - partly because class sizes are 40 rather than 100 or 120. The girls learn in a group-based, student-centred way. The students all have pencils and textbooks. Again, you might not find that in many South Sudan schools. So although on one level this photo looks quite ordinary, it really is an inspiration. In the first year when girls come to the school in primary 8 class, aged around 10, they have to be taught to use the desks for their exercise books rather than sitting with books on their lap. So that tells you a bit about where they've come from.

I mentioned it was a residential school, so there are six dormitories, with matrons to look after the girls and with beds with proper mosquito nets to keep the girls healthy.

The school has reconditioned computers which were sent out to South Sudan and so girls are able to learn IT and computing skills which again is very unusual in South Sudan.

We want to come now to some voices from South Sudan itself. We did think about whether in this webinar we could have the girls and one of the teachers speaking directly within the webinar but given that the internet sometimes can be a bit unpredictable, we thought it was better to get videos. So this video was made last week very specifically for this webinar. And so you'll hear from the head girl, about what is involved in being a head girl and her responsibilities for the school.

Video plays.

Jean Hartley:
So you can hear in that video a very confident young woman, taking a real leadership role. I can see by the online clapping and heart emojis that you are taken with this video.

Let's move on to our next video, which is going to be from the Senior Woman Teacher at the school. This is a woman called Rita Akello. She is a geography teacher in the secondary part of the school, but her job also is to ensure the welfare

of the girls. She is responsible for all their pastoral care. All the matrons report to her. So we're going to hear a little bit from her about how she became a teacher and what she hopes to achieve at Ibba Girls Boarding School.

Video plays.

Jean Hartley:
Isn't Rita inspiring. That sense of saluting our sisters and really doing all she can for education. I have met Rita myself on several occasions at the school, and she's as inspiring in person as she is on that video. Rita herself, by the way, got education in Uganda in a refugee camp. This reinforces where some of the education for South Sudanese has come from, as Rosalind mentioned earlier. Rita was profiled by Friends of Ibba Girls School, and also Windle Trust International last week on World Teacher's Day. So if you want to read more about Rita and her story about how she decided to become a teacher, you can look on either website.
https://mailchi.mp/friendsofibba/discover-ritas-story-this-world-teachers-day and
https://www.windle.org.uk/news/rita-akello-a-beacon-for-her-students

We're now going to see and listen to a a final and third video which comes from the Assistant Head girl, Nancy Simon Sebit. Again, this video was made specifically for this webinar and she will be talking more about the impact of the school in the community and family.

Video plays

Jean Hartley:
I think for Black History Month to hear from young women like this really inspiring for us all. And I think it indicates as well how important schooling is because it ripples out. It's not just about the education of these particular girls, but what they are doing for their siblings, their parents, their community, working with the Red Cross and so on. It reinforces what Fidel was saying right near the beginning of this webinar that if you educate a girl, you're educating a whole society.

This school is supported by Friends of Ibba Girls School, which is a UK charity. I know some of you in the audience are already supporters of this school and thank you very much for that. It is also supported by Windle Trust International, which is another NGO which has worked in South Sudan for a long time. The strategic plan on a page for Friends of Ibba Girls Boarding School (FIGS) shows four main aims.

It's partly about educating 360 girls. But it's also about creating a sustainable school for the long term. As an NGO, we're thinking about 100 years ahead. Third, it is a beacon school, providing inspiration for the development of other schools around South Sudan. It has teachers who are qualified, well trained and developed who can go out into workshops and work with other teachers around the locality. The school is influencing the model of education for the Ministry of Education. Fourthly, the importance for the local community is that this is not just a school, but a local resource where longer term there might be adult education, small business skills

development; a farm to provide employment and so on. The farm grows a range of food, including fresh pineapples.

All of the teachers are qualified and this in itself in South Sudan, as Rosalind mentioned, is is still relatively unusual, but all of them are qualified, take part in teacher professional development and are motivated and look after the girls almost as family.

Some staff come to work on the bicycles that the charity gave them so that they can get from the local village into the school and the staff seem to really love having bicycles. So we're thinking about the wider employment, if you like, not just the education of the girls, although that's obviously at the heart of the school.

There are regular meetings with parents. Visitation day happens once a term. We mentioned that the school catchment area is the size of Scotland. So some parents will travel for a couple of days to visit the teachers, see their children, learn about their progress and take part in the Parent Teachers Association meeting. The school provides education in a context where parents often can't read or write. Parents are learning and appreciating more how the school works and what their daughters are gaining from it.

I hope we've given you a real sense of history as well as hope and an opportunity to celebrate our sisters. We turn now to questions and comments that you'd like to explore about this amazing school and this very intriguing and relatively under-known country.

Jaspal.Singh:

Well, thank you very much, Jean. Fidele and Rosalind. First of all, let's give a round of applause to to our speakers and and to the people in South Sudan who contributed the videos. There was really, really amazing. Thank you so much for, for putting together this webinar. We had a couple of comments here. I'm just going to go to them very quickly so you can get a sense of what was happening in the chat. Lots of praise for the girls and women at the school.

There was one comment I want to read out by Liz Moody. These young women are truly inspiring, yet it breaks my heart to think of the weight of the responsibility that they take on for the school, their families and their communities. I do know that they have sporting outlets, for instance, they have a volleyball team which has had great success. But I hope that they also have time to be young and I think this is a very, very important comment over here. It was incredibly moving. Thank you so much for sharing.

Jaspal Singh:
The videos and Liz also shared a link in chat to the Friends of Ibba Girls Boarding School website: https://www.friendsofibba.org/

Jeam Hartley:

Liz’s comment about the weight of responsibility and the opportunity for them just to be girls is really so important. And I think being in a residential school does enable that. They are avid about football, they play volleyball, they play jacks; they chat in small groups. It's a very lively campus, but I think that issue about responsibility is massive.

Lydia Lauder:
It's been really inspiring to hear from all of you and a very complex picture in South Sudan actually in, in terms of education and particularly the challenges that women and our sisters face there. I was particularly interested given the kind of independence and the political divide of Sudan, another dimension of intersectionality, what role does religion still play today in terms of creating advantage or constraints in terms of access to education and progress within education for women?

Jean Hartley:
Because as Rosalind had said, schools for a long time were mission schools, whether Catholic, Anglican, or Presbyterian, there is a very strong faith base in South Sudan. This is separate from Sudan, which tends to be Islamic. It’s more Christian and animist in the South. I'm not noticing that religion gives an advantage. It feels to me like everybody is disadvantaged by the sheer lack of schools or the fact that many schools are under mango trees or are in really poor quality classrooms without proper equipment, sometimes with motivated but unqualified teachers. So, religion is very important, very important. The girls at the school go to Sunday service every Sunday and they don't have to, but most of them will do.
So religion is important in South Sudan, but I don't think it creates advantages or disadvantages. But Rosalind may also want to add to that.

Rosalind Marsden:
Just to add to what Jean said, there is a very active South Sudan Council of Churches, which includes all the different Christian denominations and they have given considerable support to the peace process in South Sudan. Civil war erupted again in December 2013, which after nearly 5 years of conflict, ended with a peace agreement in 2018, but implementation has been quite slow. All the different churches working together have been doing their best to try to push this peace process forward. In February 2023, the Pope, together with the the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Moderator General of the Church of Scotland, all visited Juba on a historic ecumenical mission to encourage South Sudanese leaders to work for peace. Laying the foundations for peace is crucial if progress in developing the educational system is to move forward, But as Jean explained, under-development is also a major factor. In many parts of South Sudan, there are still no permanent school buildings and lessons are held in the open air with children sitting under trees. There is a stark contrast between these schools and the sort of the facilities that the pupils at Ibba Girls Boarding School enjoy, which underlines the big distance that South Sudan still has to travel so that all the children have those sort of advantages.

Fidele.Mutwarasibo:
Just to say that the videos and the discussion confirm what I said earlier, that educating girls adds value to education. I can also highlight the fact that even now, when you have conflicts and troubles, there is always hope. If we see people going back to school and attending school and being passionate about getting educated, there is hope. And as I have learnt in life, there are a few things you can take with you, and education is one of them.

Jaspal.Singh:
I wonder what are the big risks right now for this excellent place?

Jean.Hartley:
Well, there's all sorts of risks, but I think one is national and one is local. I think the big risk nationally is that South Sudan is still experiencing a great deal of intercommunal conflict. Western Equatorial state is more stable than some other parts of South Sudan, but there's always a risk of conflict flaring up, particularly with elections coming up in about 18 months or so.

Locally, the community really supports the school and really values it, so that is really fantastic. But I think the big risk locally is actually maintaining and keeping this school going because at the moment it depends for about 97% of its funding from the UK and donors in other countries. That’s because Ibba Girls School is located in an area of South Sudan, which is mainly subsistence farming. There is a lot of economic poverty and there isn't yet the economic base to keep the school going. It's why the school farm is so important.

Rosalind Marsden:
As Jean said, the big risk at the macro level is the threat of insecurity. There are certain places in South Sudan where we're still seeing incidents of fighting between the government forces and the rebel groups, or inter-communal violence. National elections are now expected in December 2024 and elections can sometimes be a possible trigger for violence. However, on the positive side, Ibba county in Western Equatoria state has not been directly affected by the civil war or by inter-communal violence, enabling the school to continue to operate since 2014 without encountering security problems.

The other risk at national level is related to the impact of the war in Sudan and its impact on South Sudan. This is mainly affecting the northern part of South Sudan where over 300,000 refugees from Sudan have crossed the border. Many of them are South Sudanese who fled into the North to escape fighting at the South but have now been forced back again. There's a big requirement for humanitarian relief for them. At the same time the humanitarian response appeal for South Sudan is seriously underfunded and there's a big problem of food insecurity in South Sudan.

In the worst case scenario, which of course we all hope would never happen,there is a risk that, if the war in the Sudan continues, this could lead to damage to the

pipeline that exports oil from South Sudan to Port Sudan on the Red Sea. That oil accounts for over 90% of the South Sudan government's revenue. So if anything happened in that area, it could have serious repercussions for South Sudan's economy.

Jean Hartley:
If you feel inspired by what you've heard today, then please stay in touch. One way is to sign up to the Friends of Ibba Girls School newsletter and get regular reports from the school https://ibbagirlsschool.us6.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=cb067486802ed0ffb8b9555cd&id=698bd6efbf .

Thank you also for being involved and putting online heart emojis and clapping hands when the videos played. It's so heartwarming. It's a lot of work to keep this school going and it's lovely to feel that people are interested in this and also that it's really is making a difference in South Sudan. So we've had the history and we've also had the hope and I'd also just like to finish by saying thank you very much to my colleague Fidele and my fellow trustee Dame Rosalind Marsden and also the OU team who've been behind Black History Month. You've been a fantastic team.

Jaspal.Singh:
Let's all give a round of applause to our speakers. Thank you so much for putting together this webinar and have a lovely afternoon everybody, and I hope to see some of you again in our future events. Please also check out the events calendar that I just shared as well as the feedback forms.