

23 August 2009 Sudan stories for GWP
Wabash CoB worship service

“Oweeda, ngoni”--“Good morning, how are you” in Madi, the tribal language of Nimule, S. Sudan. “Matwee” is the answer for “I’m ok.”

I was very fortunate to go to S. Sudan for the 4th time this past January. The three week trip was called a learning tour; our goal was to listen to the stories of the people we were visiting to find out how we could best help their situation.

In each village we visited, we would have a meeting, hopefully with a women's group. In general, women are not listened to—they have very little voice in society. When we would arrive, they had chairs set up for us. Plus, any men present would sit in chairs. The women, on the other hand, sat on mats on the dirt. This really bothered us; we wanted to sit on the ground with them, but of course that would have offended their sense of hospitality for us.

At each meeting, we would have to draw the women out—they are not used to being asked their opinion. In Nimule, a bustling border

town with Uganda, one of the members of the women's sewing cooperative, which both Global Women's Project and New Community Project have supported, said, "Thank you. You have come back to see us—don't leave us behind." How poignant. The women's co-op trains women in tailoring so they can be self-sufficient. They made the outfit I am wearing today.

In Sudan, women are the glue holding the family together. They earn money for food, soap, medicine, and school tuition. Most women care for their families alone—their husbands may have been killed in the long civil war, or may be away serving in the army, or may have returned from the war so emotionally scarred that about all they can do is sit in the center of town with the other men and play cards and drink. Domestic abuse is rampant.

Very few girls are in school. We were told, "It is very hard for girls who are fortunate to be in school because if you are a girl, you are expected to do domestic work and care for children." Girls in school still have all the chores they would have if they were not in school, so there is not time to study. They fall behind quickly and are

called “dumb.” The longer a girl stays in school, the less chance there is she will be married off at age 12 or so. It is a hard life.

Even with all of these obstacles to girl-child education, everywhere we went, we were told, “When you educate a woman, you educate a nation.” Women share their knowledge and are very community-oriented.

In Pageri, a village an hour in-country from Nimule, 97 women were sharing six sewing machines. Imagine trying to learn how to sew in those conditions. Plus, they had no building, so the machines were sitting out under the baobab tree. They told us, “We are stopped by wind and rain.” They also would be displaced for community meetings held under the tree. New Community Project has provided funds for a building in the seven months since our visit.

We made the 14 hour tortuous trek into eastern Sudan to visit the town of Narus, which was badly damaged in the war, and hasn't gotten near the help of Nimule, a border city.

In Narus, 30 women meet weekly to sew, read scripture, pray, and encourage one another. While we met, they were stitching by

hand, and many were nursing babies at the same time. These women do everything by hand because they have no sewing machines. They stitch beautiful designs on bed sheets—we would call the finished product a bed spread. What takes them three weeks to sew by hand would only take 3-4 hours on a machine, yet they get the same price either way. Imagine the difference machines could make for them. 30 women requested ten basic machines and one design machine. There is no electric, so these would be treadle machines. They want the co-op to own the machines and they are happy to share. Jane, one of the leaders of the group, said, “We are stronger if we work together.” One of the other ladies, who was stitching as she nursed her baby, told us, “We have been in darkness during the war. Now we hope for light.”

Global Women's Project is working on funding a project to help this amazing group of women.

Having visited, having listened, we learned the women of Sudan have so very much to teach us. We must walk alongside them and join in their struggle. It is our struggle, too. Amen.