

**Title of Project: Gua Le Mara (Arabic for "power to the woman")**  
**Country: South Sudan (Nyaing displaced settlement and Protection of Civilian Site – POC – Juba City)**  
**Sponsoring College: Bates College**  
**Project Leader: Grace Sandia Taban (Kenya and South Sudan; UWC Changshu, China)**  
**Project Date Range: June - August 2021**

### **Context**

South Sudan's independence from Sudan in 2011 promised autonomy and better access to opportunities that would allow upward economic mobility. Instead, there has been increasing inequality across multiple generations, especially for women. In South Sudan today, women's physical and mental well-being is continually placed at risk due to violence and its effects. These hurdles diminish the quality of their life due to persistent marginalization. I propose to work with local partners to create a new program, Gua Le Mara, that will empower women economically as an important step towards addressing systemic violence against women and achieving sustainable peace in South Sudan.

Ethnic violence is a part of everyday life in South Sudan. Women bear the brunt of this violence, and yet this reality is not spoken enough of, and few programs exist to combat it. As a recent report by the Global Protection Cluster notes, multiple forms of violence are widespread both inside and outside of Protection of Civilian Sites. Social norms expect women to be resilient, self-sacrificing, and responsible for the rebuilding of communities, yet they are poorly equipped to fulfill these expectations. A key factor here is the high rate of illiteracy in the country, which leads to high rates of unemployment among women. Even the limited gains that have been underway to promote gender equality have been undermined by COVID-19, according to the United Nations 2020 document, The World's Women Report. In addition, since July 2020, over 480,000 people in South Sudan have been displaced by floods caused by heavy rain. Such natural disasters compound the pre-existing vulnerabilities suffered by women and girls. In the face of all these challenges, concerted efforts are needed to build the capacity of South Sudanese women for self-efficacy and economic independence.

### **The Project**

Gua Le Mara's main objective is to benefit a target number of 200 young girls and women currently living in informal settlements around Juba city. The project will take a two-tiered approach to combating violence against women, emphasizing both education and entrepreneurship.

First, Gua Le Mara will feature open conversations and learning about gender-based violence and sexual education (women from 9 to 30 years). Conversations will invite participants to identify the underlying causes that have allowed for the prevalence of violence, as well as ways that girls and women can better equip themselves to confront these realities. These conversations are essential because gender-based violence is known to be a central feature of South Sudanese conflicts, yet it is usually neglected.

Having these open conversations will enable participants to further these discussions in other circles, which will allow for expansive conversations on how changes can be made on various fronts. From a young age, my mother would tell me stories about how mothers prefer marrying off their daughters to stronger-seeking men to ensure their safety and well-being. Such legacies of dependency surrounding women need to be stopped. Our conversation-based curriculum will confront these kinds of negative norms and cultivate different, women-empowering understandings.

In addition to an educational curriculum using a conversational model, this project aims to empower adolescent girls and young women by holding entrepreneurship workshops that teach practical skills in making crafts and other materials that can be sold in the local market, earning them income. Specifically, we will teach the crafts of beaded-bags, shaggy carpet and soap making as a way to empower women

towards sustainable economic self-reliance.

Economically empowering women who have been oppressed by systemic violence will give them resources and opportunities to rebuild their lives. Even though women are faced with the violence crisis, often they opt to continue taking care of their families in order to survive. Women are an integral part of society; I therefore want to help shape and expand the narrative of what it means to be a dignified woman, to allow them to feel safer and to have more options for their lives.

### **Implementation**

This project will be implemented in partnership with the Agency for Social Transformation and Development, ASTAD, a community based non-governmental organization that has been working on gender equality and women's economic empowerment, child protection, and livelihoods and food security focused on women since the early 2000's. Gua Le Mara will enjoy the full support of ASTAD's certified, gender-based expert, Florence Yepi Nelson, an expert trainer of young girls and adult women in South Sudan Protection of Civilian Sites (POCs) managed by the United Nations Mission in similar areas. Additionally, I will employ the skills of a crafts expert to train the women.

The gender-based training and sexual education will last for two weeks, the crafts training will be spread out to four weeks. The first two weeks will train 100 women and the last two weeks will target the rest. The remaining three weeks will be used for daily monitoring and follow-up activities to ensure the skills-training has taken hold and to continue the conversation-based women's empowerment curriculum. Program participants will be selected in collaboration with the local community in the settlements.

The first week will be used to meet the trainers and ensure that the materials are ready at the settlements and POCs. The wide spread in training time will allow for different capabilities to be accommodated, aiming for 4-6 hours a day.

### **Sustainability**

Gua Le Mara's education and training model includes the idea that participants will pass their learning and acquired skills on to other women. The trained beneficiaries will expand the knowledge by training other women and girls in the same ideas and skills. The curriculum will include attention to this ideal, allowing for a single summer's investment to grow over time.

Another form of sustainability will be the establishment not only of local markets as a place for selling the goods produced but also a website and related digital mechanisms for bringing goods to market. This page will be managed by volunteers from the local community. This will ensure its continuity because as the sales continue, more accessories will be purchased to be reproduced.

Finally, Gua Le Mara will essentially be a leadership development program that develops a cohort of women committed to carrying the work forward. Over time, the hope is that economic cooperatives emerge and that there is a culture shift around the worth and dignity of girls and women, so that violence against them becomes a thing of the past, or at least an exception to the rule. When women have power (Gua Le Mara), violence will diminish and peace will emerge, not only for women but for all community members.