

Many of them were trained as fighters during the civil war, but now the new battle is for their rights, writes Heidi Kingstone

For women, the struggle continues

SEVERAL kilometres from the centre of Khartoum is a barren, desolate and flat plain, a suburb called Mayo. Perched on the edge of her cot in her compound, Awadia talks about her time as a female combatant. I tried to imagine her sitting on corpses ... taking a break from the fighting, being unmoved by the dead and dying around her. It's an image that's incompatible with the one she presents now ... that of a normal woman who looks after her children and the children of her husband's other wife.

She talks about the events that led to this unplanned career during the civil war in Sudan. She had returned to her village near Kadougli from Khartoum. Her family fled soon after, but she decided to stay until she could no longer hold out. Ironically, she was too frightened.

With a group of children who had stayed behind, she escaped into the forest. From there she made it across the border to Ethiopia, where she trained as a fighter for two years, and where she met her husband.

When she went on patrols she would strap their baby to her body. There was nothing else to do: had she left the child behind, the soldiers might have taken or killed the infant.

She doesn't think about those days anymore; she doesn't even have the uniform. And she would never go back to fighting. She likes the fragile peace that holds in Sudan now. What saddens her is that her husband, who had trained her, decided to take another wife, despite being Christian and despite her protests.

"How can you build a life with someone who has many wives?" asks Afaf Maki, our translator, as we drive back into town. "You can't," she concludes.

I had met Awadia and Maki through Maryam Bedri, a lecturer in gender issues at Ahfad University for Women, an institution her grandfather had established. Bedri is a woman as smart, formidable and articulate as you could find.

Still, there are two things in Sudan you don't want to be: a woman or a donkey.

Donkeys are worked hard and often beaten senseless. There are things done to women that are unspeakable.

It was for that reason that Mohammed was in the classroom at Ahfad in Omdurman, on the outskirts of Khartoum, learning about gender issues, listening to Bedri.

In a largely Muslim country, tradition rules that women are circumcised, a ritual preformed with almost uniform regularity, often on girls between the ages of seven and nine.

When Mohammed proposed to his wife, she was forced to reveal she was a rare exception. Unlike most men, who would have refused to go through with the marriage, Mohammed happily married his wife.

It was when she had her first child that her grandmother intervened, and without her consent, circumcised her after the birth.

She was distraught; Mohammed was furious and resolved to raise awareness among his community of the horror of this barbaric practice, which often leads to lifelong health problems and violates



Sudanese women take part in a military exercise in a show of power during the visit of Unicef goodwill ambassador Mia Farrow to Darfur in 2006. In the patriarchal society of Sudan, traditions and customs overrule everything, often at the expense of women. PICTURE: NASSER NASSER / AP

women's rights. Often after giving birth women need to be recircumcised.

Bedri's grandfather, Babiker Bedri, had also founded the first elementary, intermediate and secondary school for girls and young women in 1907. Bedri hopes her teenage daughter will follow in the family footsteps, helping women, as there remain huge challenges.

Sudanese women have more rights than other Arab women in the public arena – "as long as those rights don't interfere with her private life", says Bedri.

Men have all the power and are responsible for everything. "Men can decide where women will go, how she will live,

and divorce women without giving any reason. In Islam, women should have rights, but culturally she is denied."

The first women's union was established in 1952, and the first woman was elected to parliament in 1964.

When the present Islamic government came to power, in 1989, women began to find their rights curtailed. For instance, they found they could not travel alone; they needed a guardian.

Many of them do work, but they are crowded into lower managerial, secretarial and clerical levels.

They are not represented in the crucial ministries of the Interior, Defence and

Finance. And then women, especially those in the rural areas, still have the traditional roles to perform: cooking, cleaning, looking after the children, collecting firewood, catering to men.

Girls outperform boys at school – a trend noted over the past six or seven years ... but a large swath of the population remains illiterate.

"People ask why girls do so well," says Bedri. "One reason is that women see education as an opportunity to change their lives. Men find other ways. They have mobility. They can just go to another city."

Despite women's rights being enshrined in the constitution, women are often

unaware of what those are.

Professor Anna Badri, vice-president of academic affairs at Ahfad, makes a case in point about a young, illiterate woman – her former domestic worker – whom she helped to educate.

As soon as the woman's father found out, he ordered her back to the village and within days had married her off to his nephew against her will.

She did not want her four children to stay in the rural part of the country with no health facilities and no schools.

"She has all the rights," says Badri, "but the traditions and customs overrule everything."

Domestic violence is endemic, sometimes a result of economic hardship. Sudan remains a largely undeveloped country.

Other factors influence the changing patterns of relationships. The age difference between husbands and wives is narrowing, and with that, the traditional respect women had for their husbands is dissolving.

When Awadia fought alongside the men, there was no difference – she was brave, independent and economically better off. The whole country would be better with the active participation of all these women.

In search of a southern identity

SKYE WHEELER

SUDAN has been at peace for four years, but school principal Alex Esau still has some daunting problems – from swollen classrooms to under-trained staff and pupils who riot when their teachers have not been paid.

And the struggle to educate children has become more meaningful as southern Sudan implements a new school syllabus that reflects its culture and heritage.

A large cultural gap between the Arab-oriented, Islamic north and the black, mostly Christian south was central to Sudan's recent conflict. Southern insurgents complained that Khartoum, the capital, suppressed their African identity. Most countries in Africa have been responsible for their own education since they were freed from colonialism in the mid 20th century. Now, semi-independent from the north since a 2005 peace deal ended 50 years of on-off strife, southern Sudan is trying to catch up.

An English-language south-specific primary school syllabus was introduced in 2007 and last year secondary schools were given their own curriculum for some subjects.

"Our new syllabus reflects the identity of the south. That is a very important thing," said Esau.

Before the new syllabus was introduced, Esau taught from English translations of Sudan's Arabic-language national curriculum, but students struggled. Names, behaviour and settings from the arid, Arab-fused north were mysterious.

"They (pupils) had never even seen a camel," Esau laughed.

Less than 2% of references in the national curriculum mention southerners, estimated at one third of the population, said William Ater, under-secretary of the south's Education Ministry at a conference in the southern capital of Juba recently.



Children at St Joseph's School in Juba, Sudan's southern capital, work in preparation for examinations. PICTURE: SKYE WHEELER/REUTERS

Under British colonial rule, which lasted until 1956, the south was ruled separately from the north. Christian missionaries set up the first schools in the south until they were asked to leave in the 1960s.

Islamic schools were then set up in the south and their spread intensified when former President Jaffer Nimeri declared that Shariah (Islamic law) would cover all of Sudan, including the south, in 1983. By then, the south's insurgency had begun.

"They were feeding poor children in schools to try and encourage conversion," said Adelino Paterno, another school headmaster of practices in Khartoum's garrison towns. Maths calculations included examples assuming pupils prayed five times a day, as required by Islam, Ater said.

The 2005 peace accord provided the south with its own government and oil revenues, but more importantly a vote

in 2011 when the region's citizens can choose to secede or remain in their current state of semi-autonomy.

They are not waiting three years to change what their children learn. "This transformation ... is part of the peace, of secularisation," Ater said.

Both the southern government and the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) are campaigning to get more children into schools while acknowledging those already in school have too few resources. Many schools are little more than a tree and a few benches. Books, pens and chalk, despite large-scale Unicef donations, are scarce. The south still does not have a single functioning school laboratory.

Southern rebels began writing a curriculum for southern children in 1992. Textbooks were distributed to areas under the control of the Sudan People's Liberation Army, where teachers were mostly volunteers.

After the peace deal, representatives from all the south's numerous tribal cultures gathered to improve the rebel syllabus and include representation for all the south's 60-plus tribes. Christian and Islamic studies were included.

"Students will study marriage systems and traditional celebrations," said syllabus-writer Lubang Scopas. History will include 18th-century slavery and the black rebel heroes of earlier generations.

Many people are also hoping water-fed land will soon form an alternative to the dependency on oil cash, especially with food prices rising. Agriculture lessons will start as soon as children can safely use a hoe, Scopas said.

Much of the syllabus was borrowed from English-speaking Kenya and Uganda, bringing the south closer to east Africa and further away from northern Sudan, said Paul Mitchell of Britain's Windle Trust, an education charity.

Southern officials say many in the north feel the south is moving too fast. But, although the new syllabus is a source of tension, especially over examinations for entry to Sudanese universities, education is a minor issue when compared with oil-sharing and border disputes.

Sibeso Luswata, head of education in south Sudan for Unicef, said people were willing to walk, wade or canoe to get their children to learn the new syllabus but, in reality, many books still lay in cupboards, unused as under-trained teachers struggled with the novelty and the language shift.

"It's not known how many teachers need updated courses, but it's thousands more than the original estimate of 9,000," said Mitchell of the education trust's teacher training. Trainees are often keen to try new methods the next day, he said, but teachers sometimes had to cope with up to 180 pupils at a time. – Reuters

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