

## Changing the Narrative on Gender Justice in South Sudan: Jackcilia Salathiel's Story of Courage

**Jane Thirikwa:** From KAIROS Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, this is Women of Courage. We bring you stories of courage from women, grassroots peace builders, women, human rights defenders and key actors in the pursuit of inclusivity, democratic development, peace building, human rights, and ecological justice. We delve into KAIROS' gender justice work, and the impacts of collaborative partnerships with women-led grassroots organizations that advance transformative human rights and ecological justice on multiple fronts. I'm Jane Thirikwa, Global Partnerships Coordinator at KAIROS and podcast host.

In today's episode we are in conversation with Jackcilia Salathiel, the National Women's Coordinator at the South Sudan Council Churches' National Women's Program. The South Sudan Council Churches, SSCC, is one of KAIROS' Women of Courage Global partners. As an ecumenical body of the Catholic and Protestant churches SSCC works to diffuse violence and lay the groundwork for lasting peace and at the same time empower women and girls and address gender injustice.

Jackcilia, share with us a little bit about your life history, where you were born and how you got to where you are right now.

**Jackcilia Salathiel:** Thank you Jane. My name is Jackcilia Salathiel, I am a human rights lawyer. I work for the South Sudan Council of Churches in Juba. I was born in South Sudan's Western Equatoria State in Ezo County, and this is in the Azande Kingdom. I started my primary school at Azo, went to junior school and as I was completing junior school, the war (in South Sudan) came. We first went to DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo), things were not easy. We crossed into Central Africa, things were not easy. Then I had to cross into Uganda with the help of my elder sister, who was a Comboni missionary. In Uganda, I studied and completed my secondary school with the help of the Comboni Sisters, and then I had to go to the university to study law. Studying law was my desire, and to study human rights law. At the university I had to study human rights law.

While at the university, of course, as a refugee girl life was not easy. During holidays I had to work as a house help, wash peoples clothes, cook, clean, do a lot of things to help myself even work in restaurants and all that. Even at the university, I would go downtown, buy second hand clothes, wash them and sell it to the university girls. And they used to call me *auty ngoi*, that means the lady who sells clothes, and I would not mind. I didn't have a proper handbag; I'd carry my things in the this *Kavera*. *Kavera* is a paper bag. They used to call me *Mama Kavera*. No problem, *Mama Kavera* was seriously reading her human rights work. After graduation I had to do my internship at the Refugee Law Project. While at the internship I got an advert that they wanted human rights lawyers to work in Khartoum for the Eritrean refugees. I applied, then I got this job and all of a sudden it became a story among my colleagues, 'do you know *Mama Kavera, auty ngoi*? She has flown. She is now working with the UN!' And what I know is, the determination kept me. I told myself I have to study human right, I have to get into that white balloon car of UN (United Nations), UNCR. UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) was the only UN I knew about as a refugee, that was what I was interacting with. So, I was interested to work with the UNHCR. And so that was the genesis and my compassion, and my journey into human rights work.

After getting my law degree, I had now to do Masters in human rights and local governance, and then majoring on gender justice, women empowerment, equality. What has made me love this work more, as a refugee girl myself, I met people who were kind to me along the way. And it was not my only struggle by my own strength. I had to pray, I had faith in God. And as people were nice to me in my journey, I find it also an obligation to be nice and empower and help other women I work with now in South Sudan, because when I look at them, I see them, they are desperate. I was once there, but people were nice to me, people encouraged me, people empowered me. For example our Dean of School, Dr. Sylvia Tamale at Makerere University, just in the first year, she became nice to me. She saw I was a refugee, she called me and told me, "Whenever you want to cry, I give you my shoulder, to come and cry." She encouraged me, she empowered me, so I also have an obligation to translate the same to the people I work with.

**Jane Thirikwa:** That is awesome. I know Dr. Tamale's work. That is amazing how you know sometimes in our human rights work, we get the pleasure of working with these amazing women in the intersectionalities of our work as well. Circling back to you transitioning from living in Uganda and going back to South Sudan, how was it for you now, in a new country, the newly created South Sudan and not considering yourself a refugee anymore in your own country? How was that for you?

**Jackcilia Salathiel:** You know, it feels great to be home, but sometimes you get frustrated by the things that happen. But still, I am not giving up. I am determined, at least now that is home. That is where my identity is. We are now free, we have a country and that makes me work even harder. The situation that women are going through - human rights abuses, economic hardship, rape, and all sorts of bad things. I want to work hard, in whatever way that I can contribute to impact such a scenario and change the narrative.

You know, our country became independent, we were all happy, we are now brothers and sisters, all Southerners, we thought things would work out well. But shortly after, everything crumbled down, but by the grace of God, we are hopeful that at least the revitalized peace agreement to resolve the conflict in South Sudan can be implemented to the latter such that the women, the children, and all people of South Sudan can enjoy their rights. But as of now it is a struggle that we are determined to work and overcome. We are grateful to our partners such as KAIROS Canada who are giving us the support to do the peace building work, build the capacity of women to be able to speak for themselves and take decisions in issues that affect them. That is critical because knowledge and information is power. Without that knowledge, our women will remain forever victims.

**Jane Thirikwa:** It is interesting that you brought up international partners because that is a segway to another question I had. With the work that you do, and working with international partners and with the churches and ecumenical movements and networks, what has been your experience or perception about some of the challenges, especially when it comes to lack of contextual knowledge of the issues in the Global South? And also, within the ecumenical networks themselves, there are a lot of challenges with some doctrines, some policies, even in the churches where, even when they talk about social justice issues, they are not intersectional in responding to the entirety of a lot of the intersectionality of gender justice that affect women, especially Global South women.

**Jackcilia Salathiel:** When I started work with the South Sudan Council of Churches, that was my first time to live this ecumenical life in the community. But before that, I have been closer to my own church and working with the women of my church. Now, having come closer to such setting, I realize there is lot of challenge. First of all, for the Global North and South, sometimes as they (Global North) give you

funding to implement the activity, they have their own mindset and they create for you, the activity according to their own perception, which does not necessarily fit the situation on the ground. Some of them can be flexible. You explain to them, and they understand, and you make some adjustment. But sometimes the activity created does not correspond to the real issue on the ground, which makes it look like the resource they are giving is not being put to very effective use, because when you carry out such an activity and yet it was not the most needed on the ground, then resource has been wasted which cannot produce the desired effect.

But I hope with a lot of conversation and negotiation they will come to understand. And I also argue that sometimes they should visit the ground to know where their money is going - what is it on the ground; such that they will have a clear picture. While sending the funding, they really know what is on the ground and say - okay, do it according to the situation that will change your narrative. That is one challenge that I realized quickly. And concerning the local churches themselves, the issue of patriarchy is still at its highest. If we are in need of gender justice and we are the church advocating on behalf of the community, we must do by showing. I believe if we start putting it into action, it will work better than just talking about it, if our church women can begin taking position at the higher levels.

**Jane Thirikwa:** Thank you so much Jackcilia. Nothing for us without us rings true when we are talking about creating spaces for the voices of women on the table, especially when it comes to decision making on issues that affect women, and in instances where we actually do not find any women seated at the table when gender issues are being discussed.

I am curious about the intersectionality of the climate crisis in South Sudan. As we know the climate crisis is global and unfortunately, communities in the Global South are feeling the effects of the climate crisis more because some of the infrastructure is not as developed as our counterparts in the Global North. If we look at societies and communities that still rely on, for example, the rainfall patterns for their food security, and that has now, completely now been affected; when we think about the use of plastics; when we think about infrastructure to even recycle and live harmoniously with the environment, and lack of that Indigenous knowledge like before, where communities used to know how to coexist with the environment. When you talk about issues of extractivism, for example in South Sudan, what has been your experience and what can you share about how the women in South Sudan are trying to mitigate the climate crisis?

**Jackcilia Salathiel:** In South Sudan, the climate change is really affecting women badly. We have two extreme situations. The flooding areas, especially on the northern part of South Sudan, it is now coming to two years. The flooding happened, destroyed everything and caused a massive displacement. And these are women and children who are mostly affected. It takes long for this flood to go back, and the women remain in displacement camps and are being affected by that. In the South part of South Sudan, dry spells - everything dries in the field and then all this is creating hunger. Now according to what I see, there is little that is being done to mitigate these factors because I think it is lack of knowledge and lack of awareness. The plastic is being thrown everywhere. It is full covering the Nile, even polluting the water. People have overcut the trees, no rains, and all the effects are on women now. You have to go far away. Some streams, which used to provide water, are all dry up. They have to walk long distances to get water. And now to mitigate these things, it would need planting of trees, how to dispose these plastic or how to recycle them. So far, this knowledge is limited and it needs a lot of resources and a lot of work to make awareness because I know women are very creative and are quick to pick up things. But of course, when you don't have the knowledge, you are in darkness. So they need to be empowered to plant trees, to know how to do recycling. And as for the big one of the oil, we need to raise awareness

also to the people working on the oil fields to work together with the government institutions too, such that any project that comes, they have to sign a commitment of how they will mitigate the effect of that because I know development comes with its negatives, but knowing what this development will create and preparing ourselves to mitigate the effect, will be better.

**Jane Thirikwa:** Thanks Jackcilia. Now, talking about empowering women and giving them knowledge, I know that we have had some conversations about how it doesn't necessarily mean that women are not knowledgeable or that they do not have skills, they just lack opportunities to implement some of that knowledge, and to be able to put it into practice. So for instance at the South Sudan Council of Churches at the National Women's Program, with the trainings and the workshops that you hold on human rights issues and gender justice, do you think that you can tell if there has been a difference in how the community is changing, or how the community is viewing women in relation to some cultural aspects? For example, like you said, patriarchal social issues, you know, just view women as people who are supposed to stay at home and take care of the children, and that change is not particularly felt in their homes with their male counterparts. Have you seen those changes in the women who come to the programs at SSCC and do you think that your work is having an impact on the women in the grassroots?

**Jackcilia Salathiel:** Yes, Jane, it is really taking impact. Those trainings, and sometimes we don't only call women by themselves because we know women cannot advocate for themselves alone. We need also to bring men in. By these trainings of male allies, you understand that when the men come for these trainings on the first day, they can be negative, telling you all sorts of things. Even the church leaders, community church leaders - how God made the man the head of family, what do you want? But on the second day you see them coming down in line. And on the third day, this same person who was serious on day one, they have now made a plan on how they are going to go and change other men and advocate to empower women. We are like, "oh, Jesus, thank you." You know you have to smile at the end of that third day. Even for other women who would not have been coming to the trainings (because) their husbands said no. Now they come, and they even say how their husbands allowed them to go to the community work, and to do local workshops to empower other women. They tell us this testimony and we are grateful to our international partners. Through their funding, we are able to do this. The impact may be small, but small and it keeps multiplying. It keeps multiplying, and one day the narrative will change.

**Jane Thirikwa:** How about involving women in the political sphere? Women's participation in politics, women's participation in decision making and policies at the government level. What is your perception around the involvement of women, especially in the grassroots, in political involvement, and is there movement in South Sudan on that? And how are you in your program trying to advocate for more involvement of women in politics?

**Jackcilia Salathiel:** By creating the Women Link with the support of funding from KAIROS Canada, this Women Link is not only an ecumenical body for the church women. It has women from the Parliament, National Parliament, State Parliament, women from the civil societies, women from the organized forces, women from the business. We picked women from different sections of life, who have formed this Women Link. And with this Women Link we have a National Women Forum which meets quarterly, like in year they meet four times. This is where the empowerment to participate in decision making takes place. When we bring our MPs (Members of Parliament) together we, we talk to them about how they can influence the policy and make things for the other women at grassroots to begin participating. And even for the peace agreement that took place in Addis Ababa in 2018, these Women Link of ours were a formidable force. They went together with the civil societies and all. Apart from the women

government representatives, all other women, either from church civil society, were not allowed at the table. Our Women Link (members) kept rotating around the office of the AU (Africa Union) singing night and day. The women were not sleeping. *"We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome someday, I do believe we shall overcome one day."*

These men got tired. Ah, one day, two days, the third day the men came to them women. "What do you really want?" They said, "we want our representative, the church, women and civil society women to enter that negotiation room because we have our voice that we want them to go and represent. And if those women don't enter, we shall rotate for the days that people will be hear, day and night." That is how our church women from SSCC and civil society entered into that room. And exactly some of the points they had taken entered the agreement. So, it is one achievement. One member of the Central Equatoria State - not only one, but a lot of Women Link members have become members of Parliament. One of them, to date, is a member of the women's group. She is the Member of Parliament for Central Equatorial State, Upper Nile. We have a good number of women through the Women Link who have entered decision making bodies at the parliamentary level and we will continue to advocate so the circle may grow big(ger).

**Jane Thirikwa:** Talking about international human rights instruments like the UN Resolution 1325 (United Nations Security Council 1235 on Women, Peace and Security) and CEDAW (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women), SSCC is doing training on international human rights law and international human rights instruments. Do you participate in, for example, with other civil societies around the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), and do you think that the women in South Sudan are aware that there are these international instruments that they can use to advocate more on gender justice issues?

**Jackcilia Salathiel:** It is there. We will continue the advocacy, but the implementation is the challenge. Since I joined South Sudan Council of Churches we have had 2 meetings sponsored by UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), UN women, and through the National Ministry of Gender and Child Welfare. This is the ministry that is responsible for gender justice, empowerment of women, gender policies, so they called the different stakeholders together to review the National Work Plan and this is the reporting on the UN Security Council Resolution 1325. The women came together, they reviewed, and we all participated. The final thing we all agreed on is, we make all these beautiful recommendations. It is on paper, but implementation is the challenge. So we need to call on the global UN system to push our government to effect the implementation. Women are much more aware and different civil society, there is a national gender focal person forum, whereby the different grassroots women voices are brought together and there's quarterly meetings. Now we need a strategy of how to push the government for implementation. They are really demanding for this.

**Jane Thirikwa:** Thank you so much Jackcilia. You have shared so much and your work is very inspiring and we look forward to hearing from you as you continue working with women and grassroots women on gender, justice issues and wish you the best of luck, and I think our listeners at KAIROS and our networks will be very inspired. We are going to ask that they continue supporting KAIROS so that we can in turn continue supporting women and women's organizations and programs like at the SSCC, to continue this work because it's on a continuum. We have seen evidence and been witness of the incredible work that you are doing with women, and the grassroots organizations are doing with women, despite the challenges of living in situations of conflict and war. Thank you so very much.

This brings us to the end of this episode. The full episode transcript can be found on our website, [www.kairoscanada.org](http://www.kairoscanada.org). You can listen to our podcast on our website or anywhere that you get your podcasts and do not forget to follow. I'm Jane Thirikwa. Thank you for listening.