

MARY* (SOUTH SUDAN)

“I had to get my brain around the differences to make it work.”

See [Yödu’s Refugee Learner Narrative](#) for another perspective and additional information on South Sudan.

Life before Canada

Birthplace and Family

Hi, my name is Mary. I was born on April 5, 1994, in South Sudan. Before coming to Canada I lived in Ethiopia. I am of Mabaan ethnicity. My family speaks the Mabaan language.

I am the youngest child in my family that includes my three siblings (two brothers and one sister) and my mother. My father passed away when I was just six months old. He was a soldier during the civil war. My mother worked as a nurse with HIV groups for UNICEF in both south Sudan and Ethiopia.

Life in Sherkole Refugee Camp, Ethiopia

I was two years old when we moved to Ethiopia. I ended up living with my mother and three siblings in the Sherkole Refugee Camp for 12 years. I was very young when the conflict in Sudan was taking place. I know that my family left South Sudan because of the civil war and we walked to Ethiopia.

* To protect the participant’s privacy, pseudonyms have been used in this narrative.



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SOUTH SUDAN

Upper Nile State

The Upper Nile State is located in South Sudan's north-eastern region. It has an estimated population of 964,353. The state is composed of 13 counties, including Maban County.

The Upper Nile region is one of the areas in South Sudan that experienced disproportionate levels of violence and instability during Sudan's civil war due to the large number of militia groups that lived and operated in the region. The Upper Nile State has become one of the most marginalized and devastated regions in South Sudan because of the presence and activities of militias, harsh environmental conditions, and the proximity of the state to the cultural and military population of the north. In addition, the region only began to experience a significant increase in the presence of humanitarian agencies in 2006.

The majority of the state's people are nomadic "agro-pastoralists" who depend on both growing crops and the rearing of livestock, mostly cattle. Unfortunately, the area's unpredictable weather patterns, combined with other environmental challenges such as pests, disease, and flooding, has made farming in Upper Nile a complex, difficult, and uncertain endeavour. The result is limited crop yields and extensive food insecurity.

The region is rich in oil but, despite this, the region remains very poor with little improvement in basic development indicators such as education, health, sanitation, and access to clean drinking water.

Upper Nile faces external threats. After years of war and instability, many areas of the state's border with the Gambella region in Ethiopia are prone to security issues and are dominated by armed groups, unresolved intercommunal disputes, multiple waves of displacement, and competition for land, water, services, and citizenship.

Most recently, Upper Nile has become home to more than 100,000 refugees from Sudan's Blue Nile region, where conflict between Sudan's military and rebel groups has forced many to seek asylum in South Sudan, especially Maban County. In 2012, four refugee camps, in the Upper Nile, Gendrassa, Yusuf Batil, Doro, and Dori, provided asylum for the refugees from Sudan.

Mabaano of South Sudan

South Sudan is comprised of about 60 indigenous groups. The Dinka and the Nuer ethnic groups are the largest of the groups. The Upper Nile State is also diverse. The main ethnic groups are the Shilluk, Nuer, Dinka, Mabaan, and Koma peoples.

The Mabaano people (also known as Maban or Burun) are a Nilotic people (these are ethnic groups mainly inhabiting the Nile Valley, the African Great Lakes region, and south-western Ethiopia, who speak Nilotic languages). Mabaan, or Southern Burun,

is a language of South Sudan. The Mabaan groups speak different dialects.

The civil war caused the displacement of most of the Mabaan people to camps in Yabous, Wedega, and other parts of Southern Blue Nile as well as in western Ethiopia. A small Mabaan Diaspora is found in the Bungo refugee camp in western Ethiopia.

References

<www.gurtong.net/Peoples/PeoplesProfiles/Maban/tabid/212/Default.aspx>

United Nations Missions in South Sudan, Upper Nile State, <<http://unmiss.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=5094&language=en-US>>.



© John Ferguson/Oxfam. Jamam refugee camp, Republic of South Sudan. Children and women queue at a water point, in Jamam refugee camp, Republic of South Sudan. Eighteen months after its independence in July 2011, the Republic of South Sudan is teetering on the brink of a renewed civil conflict while confronting a host of other problems. One of these is a major refugee crisis in Upper Nile state near the border with the Republic of Sudan (North Sudan). CC License. <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/oxfam/8328853321>>.

Sherkole Refugee Camp

Sherkole Refugee Camp was opened in 1997. It received a large new influx of Sudanese refugees in September 2011. Many of the refugees are from Kurmuk of Blue Nile state in Sudan. The refugees of Sudanese and South Sudanese origin are from the Uduk, Mabaan, and Dinka ethnic groups. There are some long-term residents that originate from other countries, including from the Great Lakes region.



© Yann Libessart/MSF. March 8, 2014. Bambasi Sudanese refugee camp, Ethiopia. There are often fewer men in refugee camps, as many of them stay behind to fight. Many displaced mothers have sole childcare responsibilities for often large families. Any household job falls to them. <www.msf.org/article/slideshow-international-womens-day-forced-flee>. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

As of July 2012, 9,600 refugees were living in the camp. The camp has a primary to Grade 8 school and five pre-schools. It has no secondary school and lacks appropriate school supplies, such as books, desks, pencils, uniforms, etc. A high school education is only available in the town 16 kilometres away. There is need to improve access to the town's secondary school by improving transportation and increasing the school size to accommodate students from the camp. There are a large number of unaccompanied youth in the camp who need an education.



© Enough Project. October 23, 2011. Women walking down a dirt path in Sherkole refugee camp. Nearly 5,000 Blue Nile refugees can be found in Sherkole, a camp that received refugees from the 1983–2005 civil war in Sudan, and continues to shelter refugees from the Darfur, South Kordofan, and Abyei conflicts. CC License. <www.flickr.com/photos/enoughproject/6284232122/>.

References

UNHCR, Sherkole Camp Snapshot (Profile), July 2012, retrieved from <www.unhcr.org/pages/49e483986.html>.

Canadian Lutheran World Relief, There's a War No One Knows About, retrieved from <<http://clwr.wordpress.com/2011/10/17/there%e2%80%99s-a-war-no-one-knows-about/>>.



© Norwegian Refugee Council/Christian Jepsen. Humanitarian agencies have established some schools for the refugee children in the camps of Upper Nile, but there is still a huge need for educational programmes. <www.nrc.no>. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

I was just a child and so I was carried during the journey.

My first memories of living in a specific community or place were in the Sherkole Refugee Camp. I recall that the camp was very large. My mother worked as a nurse in the camp. Our round house was made of grass and painted clay with drawings on the clay sides. I was very happy living in the refugee camp. I had many friends to play with. I felt safe in the refugee camp. What I liked the best about living in the camp was there was a school program and it was free. I started school at the age of 4 and attended until age 11 in the refugee camp. The school was made from cement and it had about 10 classrooms. I seem to recall that there were about 1,000 students and less than 20 teachers.

School would begin in September and continue for eight months. A typical school day was from Monday to Friday, either in the morning or the afternoon depending on the grade. Grades 1 to 3 attended from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Grades 4 to 8 attended from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. From Grade 9 on, the students would attend “college” in Addis Abba, the capital city of Ethiopia. In the upper elementary I had different teachers for different subjects. The teachers would move from class to class. We studied four subjects during the school year: mathematics, science, social studies, and English. All of them were taught in English. There was an additional subject but I can’t remember/spell it. The classrooms had long tables and chairs, three to four students at a table. There were textbooks for every subject. Sometimes the students would have to share them. There were chalkboards.

I attended school quite regularly except when I had to help my Mom, or had to wash my clothes, or if I

got sick. I liked going to school, but I really didn’t have a favourite subject. I don’t recall having any difficulties in school. I do not remember having an idea of what I wanted as a career or to do when I finished school before I came to Canada at the age of 14.

Immigration to Canada

I immigrated to Canada in 2008 from Sherkole Refugee Camp in Ethiopia with my mother and one of my brothers. My older brother and older sister remained behind because they both had married. I have not seen them since, but I communicate with them via telephone, Facebook, or Skype.

Before we emigrated, we were told that Canada was very cold and that we would need to dress in very warm clothes. The information about the weather/climate in Winnipeg scared us! My mother chose to come to Canada because UNICEF, who she was working for, encouraged her to do so. The UNICEF officials told my mother that in Canada her children would have an opportunity to get a good education and it would be a good life for all of us. Also, I had cousins living in Manitoba. I was happy to come to Canada because I had heard that I wouldn’t have to work and that there would be



© Marcel Cretain/QMI Agency. Winnipeg Sun. July 9, 2011. A parade celebrating the independence of South Sudan takes place in Winnipeg, Manitoba. <www.winnipegsun.com/2011/07/09/celebrating-indendance>. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

enough money to live on. However, now I know that this isn’t true and that I have to work if I want to have money to live and do the things I wish to do.

Starting a New Life in Canada

We arrived in Canada on October 8, 2008. I was 14 years old when I came to Canada. Our family was met at the airport by settlement counsellors from Welcome Place who were also South Sudanese. We didn’t experience any difficulties in settling in Winnipeg, because the Welcome Place counsellors helped us a lot. At first we lived in temporary housing downtown at Welcome Place and now we live in an apartment in East Kildonan.

My first impressions of Winnipeg and Canada were not very good. I cried when I saw the bare, leafless trees. It wasn't at all what I expected. I could not sleep that first night. I only managed to fall asleep the next day.

Looking back at that time, what I liked the most about being in Canada was going to school. What I liked the least was the snow and the cold weather. The first year was very difficult for me because I was so uncomfortable going out. Now I have become accustomed to the weather and the climate and I don't worry about it anymore.



© Jillian Austin/Winnipeg Sun. July 9, 2011. A group of children gathers at the celebration at Central Park in Winnipeg, marking the independence of South Sudan. <www.winnipegsun.com/2011/07/09/celebrating-indendance>. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Obviously, the move to Canada has affected my family because we are now separated from my older brother and sister. However, I made friends in my new community, but it takes time to know people and become good friends. Just like me, I don't think that my mother or my brother had any difficulties immigrating or adjusting to life in Canada, other than the weather. Our relationships are good and our bonds are strong.

The first school that I attended in Canada was a large high school. I would describe it as being a lovely school with students and teachers who were kind and friendly. The school had smaller class sizes and more teachers to teach the students than in the school in the camp in Ethiopia. One of the big differences between the school in Ethiopia and Canada is that every day in the refugee camp I would speak Mabaan but in Canada, only English could be used throughout the day.

One of the things that I needed to adjust to was the difference between English spoken in Africa and English spoken in Canada. The Canadian accent is very different, but also there are differences in the words used and the pronunciation. I had to get my brain around the differences to make it work.

At first, I was placed in a Grade 10 EAL class for the entire day and then the second year I was partially in EAL and regular classes. But it was not just English that I studied that first year. I also studied some other subjects (English, math, and mini-

units in science and geography), which helped me develop some subject area skills and prepare me for the regular classes.

It was in the EAL class that I met my best friend. I didn't find it that easy to make friends. It takes time but I would say "hi" to people in my classes and gradually developed friendships. The first few weeks were difficult because I didn't feel comfortable and I was shy about the English that I spoke. It was so different! It wasn't easy to come into a classroom where you didn't know anyone and where the routines were all different. In the regular classes there were educational assistants to give students extra support. The teachers offered and gave me additional help at lunch or other times outside of class. I felt comfortable accepting and coming for the extra help.

The EAL teachers were also very important in the first few years. I got a lot of help from my EAL teachers and I had really good relationships with all of them. I recall that they used flash cards to help me learn vocabulary and math facts. Even when I was no longer in the EAL program, I was welcome to return to the EAL class to get some extra help when I needed it. Everyone was just lovely, in my opinion.

The most difficult part of going to school was speaking English. I was very shy about speaking and communicating in my new classes at the beginning of each semester. I found it hard to ask questions in front of my classmates. I thought that if I said something that the other students would laugh at me. However, I always felt comfortable asking questions or speaking privately with my teachers. Once I became accustomed to my new teacher, I would feel more comfortable and confident in asking for help.



Reuben Garang was born in what is now the South Sudan. He was one of the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan—unaccompanied minors who were forced out from villages due to civil war in Sudan in the 1980s and ended up taking refuge in Ethiopia. When the civil war broke out in Ethiopia, Garang moved back to Sudan where he became a child soldier. He later spent many years in refugee camps in Kenya before coming to Canada. While volunteering at Winnipeg Harvest, Garang authored the report *Integration and settlement: The experiences and expectations of African immigrants and refugees*, which highlights the challenges facing African immigrants and refugees after arriving in Canada, and recommends possible solutions. He earned his bachelor of science and master's degree from the University of Winnipeg. For the first time after over 20 years away from home, Garang returned to Africa to reconnect with his surviving family members in the refugee camps in Uganda. He now works for the province.
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I worked part-time, usually about 35 hours a week on three days after school and then on the weekends at McDonald's. Between attending school and working I had a very busy schedule.

Reflecting back on my experience, I feel that the programming and the support that I received met my needs. Everyone did their best to give me the support or help I needed. I love being in school in Canada because I get to learn different subjects, meet new students and teachers, learn how to be independent, and be part of a community. Also, I love the homework and projects that I had/have to do!

Life Today and Hopes for the Future

I am pleased that at this point my family and social relationships are really good. I have not experienced any difficulties related to finding employment, health, or education. I have had good experiences at school in Canada. My schooling has taught me how to be a good student and my teachers helped me plan for my future. I feel that I am well-prepared for the future. I have many opportunities, and I have high hopes for the future.

I graduated from high school in June 2012. I plan to work at McDonald's during the summer and work longer hours so that I can save more money. This will help when I apply and go to college in September. At first I wanted to be a doctor, but now I would like to be an airline pilot. I know that there are probably not many female pilots, but I intend to do some research on the possibilities of becoming a pilot.

When I was in school in Ethiopia I did not have a sense that I was learning very much and I didn't think about my future. But in Canada I can see that there are many opportunities and I am encouraged to think about my future. I would like to travel. I believe that it is possible to do and be what I want, but it will take time and effort.



Suraya Issa, also known as **Baifa**, a South Sudanese Canadian based in Toronto, is a writer, poet, author, independent scholar, and Founder and Executive Director of the Centre for Women's Advancement for a New Sudan (CWANS). CWAN International is a youth initiative started by South Sudanese in the Diaspora to promote and empower young women and youths in the areas of health, academics, sports, social issues, and economic justice.
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VIDEO RESOURCES

See [Caution Concerning the Use of Resources about War and Refugee Experiences](#).

History of Sudanese Conflict and South Sudan

Darfur in 10 Minutes: An Overview of the Conflict in Sudan by Pete McCormack presents an interview with Ivan, a former aid worker.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=USLDoliFzzg

Two decades of war: Sudan's history of crisis by Journeyman Pictures: The documentray provides an overview of the history of the conflict in Sudan since post-colonial times.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=KB5eNauNhs4

What's going on in South Sudan? (2014) by Truthloader: An overview of the South Sudan conflict since it became the world's newest state when it seceded from Sudan in 2011.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=MySLTevlDwE

Massacre in South Sudan (2014) by CBC News: An interview with Nonviolent Peaceforce director Tiffany Easthom on targeted ethnic killings in South Sudan in spring 2014.

www.cbc.ca/player/News/ID/2451150545/

Sudanese Refugees

Ethiopia: South Sudanese Refugee Influx by UNHCR: Despite a ceasefire agreement signed in early May, fighting continues between government and opposition forces in South Sudan. The renewed conflict has forced thousands of refugees to seek shelter in Ethiopia.

<http://youtu.be/MMIPX0nELN0>

Ethiopia: A Green Refugee Camp by UNHCR: Sherkole, in the western highlands of Ethiopia, is showing that a refugee camp can be a place for a conservation project.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckrouEp1S1I

South Sudan: In my Shoes by UNHCR: Former refugees bring special insight to their work in South Sudan helping refugees.

www.unhcr.org/v-50a0d06f6

The Village: Life in South Sudan (2011) by Todd Hardesty of the Alaska Sudan Medical Project: "This 37-minute documentary is a moving, heartfelt portrayal of life in Old Fangak, South Sudan. Produced by filmmaker Todd Hardesty and narrated by Emmy-winning narrator Peter Thomas in newly independent country of South Sudan."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lesvJ7MTdQ

Sudanese in North America

A trailer for the movie, *The Good Lie*, by Warner Brothers: A movie about the experiences of three Lost Boys' settlement in the United States.

www.warnerbroscanada.com/index.php/coming-soon/the-good-lie/

Lost Boys of Sudan by KTEHTV: A video that features the reflections and stories of two Lost Boys who settled in the United States.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kQSg0z6vEAA

For additional resources concerning Sudan, see the [Video Resources](#) provided at the end of Yodu's narrative.