

FNF Human Rights Podcast Episode 2 – South Sudan_Transcript

“Battle for the soul of South Sudan- the tipping scales of politicking and human sacrifice

[00:00:00] **Audio Clip:** South Sudan, civil war from 2013 to 2018 often fought along ethnic lines claimed an estimated 400,000 lives triggered a famine and created Africa's biggest refugee crisis. Since the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Six days after a major agreement was sealed between south Sudan's rifle leaders fighting erupted in most of the country.

[00:00:24] The country military officials have president Salva Kiir here and the vice-president Riek Machar made the announcement while calling for a ceasefire in the capital of Juba on Friday. The UN human rights investigators say crimes being committed by all sides in the conflict include rape, castrations, and ethnic abuses.

[00:00:46] Many victims told us that they had not launched formal complaints in connection with violations due to fear of reprisal. As many violations were allegedly perpetrated by prominent figures and powerful [00:01:00] institutions. South Sudanese army is requesting the UN to provide names of officers suspected of having committed crimes so that it can take action.

[00:01:16] **Masechaba Mdaka:** I warmly welcome you to our next “Let’s Talk Human Rights” podcast episode. My name is Masechaba Mdaka and I am happy that you have tuned in again. Our journey today takes us to the youngest, independent country in sub-Saharan Africa, South Sudan. The Republic of South Sudan - a [landlocked country](#) bordered by [Ethiopia](#), [Sudan](#), [Central African Republic](#),

[00:01:44] The Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Kenya. As at the year 2020, the population was estimated at around 11 million people, and is expected to grow to 19 million by 2050. Juba is its capital and largest city. South Sudan gained independence from Sudan in 2011, marking a promised restart and hope for its people,

[00:02:12] having long endured years of conflict and subjugation from its now neighbouring country, Sudan. With a resilient nation fervently boasting a culture of organised resistance movements even against the throws of armed resistance movements which dominate the terrain. South Sudanese people do have a voice, and they use it. In an article published in April 2022 by journalist Khaya Khumalo for the Friedrich Naumann Foundation

[00:02:44] he notes and I quote “ The oil rich South Sudan has been engulfed in ethnic violence since December 2013 and over 400 000 people have died since the conflict started. Numerous attempts to build peace have failed, including the pact that saw opposition leader Riek Machar return as Vice President in 2016, only to run away as fighting didn't stop.

[00:03:12] A second peace settlement was signed in 2018, which mainly held with warring parties forming a coalition in 2020 and Salva Kiir and Riek Machar trying one more time to run as the country's President and Vice-President respectively.” end quote. Yet here we are again at the other end of another cease-fire and peace agreement. The starting point of our analysis into the situation in South Sudan fundamentally should begin where the country's position and stance

[00:03:49] is on international instruments and standard international practises for the recognition of human rights. Let us take a moment to remind ourselves of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders which was adopted by consensus by the General Assembly in 1998, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

[00:04:16] While the Declaration is not a legally binding instrument, it contains principles and rights that are based on human rights

standards enshrined in other legally binding international instruments. Moreover, the adoption of the Declaration by the General Assembly by consensus represents a very strong commitment by States to its implementation.

[00:04:42] Today. I am very pleased to be joined by honorable Ms Animu A Risasi Amitai and Ms Merekaje Lorna Nanjia. Animu is a south Sudanese peace women, youth development advocate and politician who has dedicated herself to ensuring [00:05:00] peace and prosperity in South Sudan. And in east Africa region through her various national, regional, continental, and global engagements with vast experience in government communications and advocacy.

[00:05:15] Animu previously served as Lead Speechwriter for South Sudan's Former First Vice President, and led the process of crafting South Sudan's Policy at several multilateral engagements including the UN General Assembly, UN Human Rights Council and the Commission on the Status of Women to mention but a few.

[00:05:36] Animu is a strong campaigner for equality in nationality and citizenship rights, in particular for marginalized minority communities including women. Animu is an avid sports enthusiast and speaks English, French, Italian, Japanese and basic Arabic.

[00:06:01] Merekaje Lorna Nanjia is a graduate from the University of Nairobi. She served as an advocacy and lobby focal person for CPJ (Citizens for Peace and Justice), which is a coalition of civil society representatives, academics and individual activists from South Sudan. From 2014 to 2015, she was also one of the Civil Society Negotiators at the Multi-stakeholder Intergovernmental Authority for Development.

[00:06:30] IGAD-led South Sudan peace negotiations in Addis Ababa. Merekaje was instrumental in organizing the first ever South Sudan national civil society convention after South Sudan's independence in July 2011. Currently serving as the Secretary General of South Sudan Democratic Engagement, Monitoring

and Observation Programme also known as SSuDEMOP, an organization that made a significant contribution in monitoring and observation of the 2010 Sudan General Election and the 2011 Southern Sudan

[00:07:09] Referendum for Self-determination. Merekaje helped establish SSuDEMOP and now the organization has grown to focus on issues of Governance and Democracy, Gender Mainstreaming and Conflict Mitigation. In recent years, Merekaje has been keen and engaged in advancing the reform and transformation agenda through legislative review

[00:07:33] development processes and other national-level advocacy efforts. She represents the civil society at the ongoing Public Finance Management reform process in South Sudan at the level of the oversight committee. In 2020, Merekaje Lorna was recognized among global human right defenders and awarded the prestigious Franco-German Award for Human Right Defenders.

[00:08:02] Today, I invite Anim(u) and Merekaje Lorna to share their views, experiences and reflect on the long prevailing conflict situation and the dwindling space for human rights in South Sudan. Animu, Merekaje Lorna , I welcome you. and may I congratulate you both on sterling record of accolades in both your areas of work respectively

[00:08:29] Our episode today is titled "The battle for the soul of South Sudan- the tipping scales of politicking and human sacrifice". Another ceasefire and another peace agreement, yet the only 2 victors or benefactors from this process are Salva Kirr, Riek Machar with their power plays. Animu, might I direct this question to you. Why do we find ourselves here again, and what do people in South Sudan understand about the conflict?

[00:09:06] **Ms Animu A Risasi Amitai:** Um, thank you so much Masechaba um, for having me on this podcast. It's, it's really strange that 11 years down the road after South Sudan, got independence that we find ourselves in a situation where the elite still, you know are fighting over power.

[00:09:24] That for the ordinary person who is me, who is Lorna, who is any other young, south Sudanese girl that access to basic education, to healthcare, to, um, water, to any other basic service seems like a dream that it's something that only a few have a privilege to get. And it's, it's just sad, you know, but also the sense of.

[00:09:52] Lack of optimism for what we dreamt about for the future that, um, for South Sudan, you know, independence [00:10:00] really didn't mean freedom that while the country got independence, freedom is something that is completely different. And freedom is me being able to have safe drinking water is me not having to depend on food rations.

[00:10:13] Is me not having to go to a hospital and being able to get the basic medical services. Why do we find ourselves in this situation again 11 years later? And maybe if you add the 33 years of the conflict, why do we find ourselves in that situation? I think that, um, anyone whose had the opportunity to be a leader of this country.

[00:10:39] Have sort of forgotten why we struggled for so long to leave oppression, to be sort of locked away from the jaws of oppression. And it became about instant gratification. What I could do for myself, right now. And, and no one is excluded, whether it's leaders in politics, whether it's leaders in civil [00:11:00] society or leaders in business. Each and every one of us sort of did take an inward look on the aspirations that everyone hoped on for so long. We just thought about how can we instantly gratify ourselves.

[00:11:16] And, and that's why we now have a struggle for power that's now why we people care about positions instead of what responsibilities they can do to their people.

[00:11:29] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Merekaje, taking on from what Anim has just shared, how do you perceive the ongoing presence of international agencies missions posted in South Sudan?

[00:11:41] Anim speaks to the 33 year long conflict plus now the 11 years since independence. Who are these missions ultimately serving?

[00:11:52] **Ms Lorna Merekaje:** Thank you very much. First and foremost, I must say, thanks for hosting me for this compensation as an activist, [00:12:00] it's usually a moment of reflection and a moment of rethinking.

[00:12:05] Where are we? And I'm glad you're asking this question. Coming to the presence of international agencies in the country, I think there are two sides to this. One side is that if you look at the humanitarian situation in South Sudan, it is dire. And the surrounding has to do something. But then as I've always said, everybody has interests.

[00:12:30] It's not a hundred percent care. Something has to be gotten out of it. We have got jobs for people and we have got continuity of different institutions. We have multilaterals coming in with their, with their games and all that is going on in the end of the day, you realize that actually the primary beneficiaries of what is happening in South Sudan may not be the ordinary south Sudanese citizens.[00:13:00]

[00:13:01] However, on the face value it looks like we are helping the ordinary south Sudanese citizen. Therefore there is need for us to rethink the humanitarian approach. There's need for us to rethink development itself in south Sudan. There is need for us to rethink engagement with multilaterals in South Sudan. If you look at the recent development, they've disrupted credit facilities that was advanced towards different countries by IMF, South Sudan.

[00:13:31] Was a beneficiary, but ask yourself where did the money go? I think that is a question that everybody needs to ask. We have seen the audit report. We have seen efforts being made towards all that.

[00:13:48] But then it's not being realized. So to be honest, the understanding the benefits of the presence of multilaterals or international agencies in south Sudan may not necessarily be for the ordinary south Sudanese people.

[00:14:03] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Taking on your response slightly further Merekaje, while we reflect on the resilient nation that is the

south Sudanese people, which have come a long way and having now to endure [00:14:17] what has now become the defined reality around the conflict, how are the people of South Sudan coping with everyday life?

[00:14:26] **Ms Lorna Merekaje:** That is a difficult question and I would be lying to say that I'm going to clearly outline how people have been coping with the everyday reality of life. But I think it's because the clock is ticking.

[00:14:41] The sun is rising and the sun is setting. South Sudanese, the ordinary south sudanese is able to live and see the daybreak for the next day. It's a very difficult and sad situation because you realize that the gap between those who have, and those who have not in South Sudan has widened so much. And that's an issue [00:15:00] that formed

[00:15:01] Part of the core of the liberation struggle. But at the moment we have the situation where that gap is widening and it's widening right on our face. And you realize that it's the same liberators that are widening that. And it's, it's unfortunate. We always ask this question as ordinary south Sudanese. That - wait a minute, a few years ago, during the liberation, this, same people were at.

[00:15:26] And then today they were entrusted to govern the country with few people who tag a long with them. They have multi-million properties and they have multi-millions dollars in their account. Where is that coming from? So I think, I think it's, it's a very difficult question to understand how the ordinary south Sudanese is living, but we're living because we are living by God's grace.

[00:15:50] **Masechaba Mdaka:** It's quite harrowing Merekaje when you think about what that means from a day to day, as you say, as the sun rises and it [00:16:00] sets, you know, they see south Sudanese, people need to see another day. Animu, what are the unheard stories of courage that don't make it to mainstream media? We're used to hearing and seeing a certain narrative around the conflict in South Sudan, but what are those unheard stories of courage that really keep people going?

[00:16:26] **Ms Animu A Risasi Amitai:** And, you know, I was reflecting on this, um, question, you know, what are some of the stories that, you know, are stories of real courage that many people don't hear about? You know? And, and I just want to sort of highlight really two areas. Young people who are doing the impossible to have a livelihood, but might not necessarily be seen.

[00:16:49] Who create spaces from nothing - spaces to come together. I know of a business, um, where they started, you know, aqua bricks. And I thought to myself [00:17:00] who thinks about aqua bricks when charcoal is, or is the highest source of energy, but also I've seen women who are incarcerated. For example, women who are on death row.

[00:17:13] They sit inside there. They have no hope of future of their cases ever making it to court, but these women are building the skills around beading and I'm a needlework and they sell these, this thing has become so popular that they sell the products, the products that they make. And they're making so much to the extent that they are supporting the people who are outside, you know, they're supporting the families that are outside.

[00:17:43] And I found, I was like, no one ever talks about this, no one, this is a woman who doesn't have a future of ever seeing those people outside ever again, but she or she is day in, day out trying to make a living for her families outside. And we never hear these stories. So this really, really, really was, [00:18:00] um, a bit, even for me, was very

[00:18:02] touching, because I thought to myself, we are abusing the opportunities that we have, you know, because he had people who ideally should have given up on life. You know, when you're incarcerated for death row, you have no hope of the courts ever having redress or, but they're here struggling every single day to make sure that their families have something to eat. [00:18:22] I mean, if there's anything that says resilience, this for me was it.

[00:18:30] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Absolutely. I honestly cannot agree with you more on that. When you speak of resilience, especially

against such adversity, it really has to be commended. And one really needs to note these very important highlights, which are happening even though the rest of the world might not know of them.

[00:18:48] The human rights defenders space is one across the African continent that is very challenging to navigate. Merekaje, as a female human rights defender [00:19:00] operating within South Sudan, please describe for us the environment you are operating within one as a human rights defender in general, and how being a woman human rights defender poses its own unique set of challenges.

[00:19:16] **Ms Lorna Merekaje:** I must say that this pace and where we operate as human rights defenders is, is quite quite complicated. It is complex. And we always ask ourselves, we always have to ask ourselves, why are we really doing this? Why am I doing this? And I think that has two sides because then on one side, each re-emphasizes

[00:19:43] The commitment, but on the other side, it opens our eyes to see the reality of our country. I must say that the environment is really, really challenging and we are not different human rights defenders. We are the sense also, Denise, that you have just [00:20:00] asked about their stories of courage. There are south Sudanese people who are living.

[00:20:05] With the people who have offended them in one way or another. These are the same people who are seeing the, the injustices in society. These are the same people who are see, who are clearly seeing the unfairness in our society and asking the question of how? And why are we subjecting fellow south Sudanese to this? And that particular question makes the environment very difficult for us because the moment you're asking the question of how? It means you're challenging.

[00:20:38] Somebody who is more powerful. You're challenging somebody who has power over you and those that are at the most bottom. So it's, it's a very difficult situation. As a woman it's even more complicated because we're coming from a very pa-

triarchal society whereby even a woman speaking her mind [00:21:00] in some societies within South Sudan is, seemed to be problematic.

[00:21:06] To others it's been seen to be something that is unusual and this kind of thinking. This aspect of male chauvinism is not only in social setups, but also places in our institutions. So we find it quite difficult as a female rights activists or female human defender, human rights defender.

[00:21:31] You might, you might be raising an issue that is of concern, but then when you raise that, the first thing that has been seen is what is this woman saying? And you're like, Hey, I'm not just a woman. I am a human being. So I think being a woman and a female human rights defender in South Sudan context is rather very difficult and a challenging thing.[00:22:00]

[00:22:00] It requires a bit of thick skin. It requires more courage. It requires resilience. It requests determination because not unless you're determined, there are days you wake up in the morning and you feel like everything looks to be obstructing you and you have to overcome hurdles from the time you leave your house until you come back home. And those hurdles are both because of your work, but also because of the factor that you were a woman. It's, it's quite difficult.

[00:22:27] **Masehaba Mdaka:** And, um, I'd like to take you from what Merekaje has just spoken about with regards to determination, working as a female women, human rights defender. You personally have experienced arrests, incarceration, and even exile from your home country. How did that experience define and perhaps chart a different path for your future in South Sudan [00:22:55] And how are you now free to do your work?

[00:22:58] **Ms Animu A Risasi Amitai:** You know, [00:23:00] incarceration or, um, you know, being jailed is probably one of the most difficult or painful experiences that somebody has to go through. And especially when it's not justified, you know, it's, it takes you to many places. You begin to doubt yourself, you begin to think, is this worth it?

[00:23:25] But then also you reach there because it has, you know, sort of several different phases. Most of the time it's done with the level of humiliation that you just don't think you can get out from. And even, you know, I consider myself relatively very resilience. I can tell you that I reached a breaking point.

[00:23:48] You know, I thought that my breaking point was getting there. And this is somebody who is highly networked. This is somebody who has, um, a lot of resources, but has maybe [00:24:00] people making noise for you on the outside? You know, you're able to reach out to different resources. So I imagine what that means for a person who doesn't have access to that, who doesn't have access to networks who doesn't have access to resources, what that can do to an individual and you know, for about a month, you know, after I had sort of been released.

[00:24:24] I couldn't interact properly with, um, people that told them even my family. I was somewhat, um, nervous, cautious. I found that I was self-censoring myself. So in short, the drive, the drive to continue fighting, the drive to continue speaking up can really be challenged. And, and that's what it does, but also it can be an impetus for you to keep doing more.

[00:24:53] I know that organizing for example, because when my, [00:25:00] I want to sort of, you know, maybe dive a bit, you may allow me to some of the details plus your, um, uh, arrested, illegally arrested, but nobody knows where you are, then there's a special attempted to petition and then continued incarceration. And no matter what you keep saying, no matter what the law keeps saying, nobody seems to be listening to you.

[00:25:22] And it seems like there is invisible hands that are sort of blocking that process, that blocking the process to your freedom. That can really make your optimism die, because it's like you are at the mercy of somebody and you don't know what to do to sort of secure your freedom. And while that can be a breaking factor.

[00:25:45] I think that it's also a real impetus. It's like, if it can happen to somebody like me that know so many people. What about other people that don't have resources? So for me, it was a real

real [00:26:00] drive for the type of work that I need to be doing. Being able to continue reaching out there, being able to continue putting yourself out there, but being able to also speak up, speak out against injustices, against unfairness.

[00:26:14] Lorna mentioned before that it's, um, human, human rights work, especially for women. And I want to add, you know, young unmarried women, that's sort of like a triple minority. Nobody listens to you. Like if you're a woman you're already in that stage where no one is listening to you, but if you're a young unmarried woman, then you're just a girl.

[00:26:36] What do you know? What are you fighting for? It makes it difficult. It makes you try to sort of start self-censoring yourself and being careful. And that's the situation that we find ourselves in right now, that even when you want to do the right thing, you have to examine what is the right mechanism of doing the right thing?

[00:26:57] It's not just about the right thing anymore. [00:27:00] It's if I do this, do I protect myself and do I protect those around me? If I speak out about this, how do I speak about it in such a way that they get the message without harming myself? And if I say this, do I have the courts for redress? Do I have belief in the justice system, for example, and unfortunately here it's, it's not there.

[00:27:22] The justice system is very vague, so you're not sure that even when you go to the justice system, that you'd be able to get redress, for example. So I think it's sort of a double edged sword and such an experience can also make it difficult for your loved ones or your family to support you. And I think it's a very important aspect in human rights work that you have the strength of those that love you or your family, because it can become a toll for them while you have your convictions for them, they might not completely understand your convictions.

[00:27:54] And so every time you want to speak up or to stand out, they say, why, why do you want to make us go through [00:28:00] this again? Or something like that? So you'll have also work at the family level. You have to help them understand the convictions.

You have to let them know that it's not just about me as an individual, that this could happen to any of us, you know?

[00:28:13] So I guess, you know, it's sort of a double edge sword. It's um, you use the same sword, but two different sides of the same sword. Yeah. Sorry. I feel like I became somewhat a bit emotional, so. Yeah.

[00:28:30] **Masechaba Mdaka:** It's important. Um, I think your delivery and, and, and reliving these experiences that you've, you've had to go through.

[00:28:38] And so unjustly, so this is, this is really the essence of the message that we want to get across is, is really how, you know, if the human rights defenders at the frontline are really at, at, at the, at the receiving end of, of, of the injustices, what more, the ordinary, south [00:29:00] Sudanese, who, as you rightfully say, doesn't have access to these resources and knowing the networks of the people who are able to, to come to their aid?

[00:29:10] It is on that point, Aminu, that I just want to speak about and bring up the fact that there is an active human rights defender network in south Sudan. And listening to you deliver on your experiences and what you've had to undergo. One can only hope or assume in this case that there is a level of support that they do provide in terms of when things do become too much, as you quite rightfully put it, you do reach breaking point.

[00:29:42] You do wonder whether you are still doing the right thing. How has the sheer existence of this human rights defender network met by authorities and how also fully effective isn't in voicing, challenging and [00:30:00] defending human rights abuses in fulfilling its mandate? Perhaps Animu, if you could touch on the issue of the support provided by the network and then Merekaje, I'd like you, please then to follow on.

[00:30:15] And speak to the challenges that do rest with the network in terms of how active and possible it is for it to fulfill its mandate.

[00:30:25] **Ms Animu A Risasi Amitai:** The human rights defenders network in South Sudan works under very extenuating circumstances. First of all, they are a target in, in themselves. And, and most times when you find yourself unjustly detained or incarcerated or exiled, what the expectation of you is, is that you would become a pariah even to those that are willing to help you.

[00:30:51] And, and sort of every thing is left at the mercy of your family or your loved ones, because your family have a justification for reaching out to your [00:31:00] family have because of the blood relation or because, you know, you're their responsibility to say, but the expectation for human rights defenders is

[00:31:09] They have people, threatening them as well. So even if they want to, to reach out most of the time they, they organize for legal aid, but they also organize in case you become see, or your health condition. And also the feeding it's, it's, it's very demanding. It's very demanding to be incarcerated, but it becomes very difficult.

[00:31:30] They can't come to visit you and for the mental health, um, sort of encourage you. Um, they have people following them. Let's say, they've come to visit somebody incarcerated. They have people following them. But I think that all factors considered, they continue to do a very good job. And I know that recently, they have taken up social media.

[00:31:50] So people really, really vamped up, um, the social media support. If it wasn't for social media, nobody would have known where I was in the first four days that I was [00:32:00] detained. I could have been disappeared and no one would have known, but it was the human rights defenders. They never slept every single day.

[00:32:08] They created hashtags. They created online petitions. They created an online go fund me account for legal aid. They reached out to so many different levels, even when they were being watched locally. They were being followed locally. They were able to do things that directly, you know, risking their lives and,

and so here you are you already in a risky situation, but even the people who are helping you, it's very risky for them.

[00:32:35] And it becomes a very, very difficult compounded situation. Um, because no one really knows how tomorrow is going to be. So it's sort of like we live for today. We make sure all the information that we are required with is provided so that if another person has to take up this role. You know, we know that at this point you live every day as if it was your last day and they live the same experience as you, [00:33:00] even if they're not in detention, even if they're not disappeared, they live the same experience as you, because they are under the same level of risk.

[00:33:07] They're under the same level of difficulty. The security don't let them rest. They tap their phones, they will follow them. They'll probably scare their family members. So whatever they do is a similar lived experience that you you're probably going through but they don't stop. You know, the human rights defenders, they don't stop for a single day, all of the 58 days of illegal detention.

[00:33:31] And there's no day that they've been stopped mentioning or speaking or talking about my name. And I think that, you know, that really must be commended.

[00:33:39] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Absolutely. Absolutely. Um, Dealing in, in those extenuating circumstances, um, one can only commend them for their bravery and courage in standing by you and, and it's, um, it's really noteworthy.

[00:33:53] Um, Merekaje, um, what has your experience been in terms of being part of the [00:34:00] network and with human rights abuses, reporting Um, you know, monitoring, measuring the impact of the severity of, of what is happening? Um, how in your experience has the, the mandate of the human rights defender network in South Sudan been impacted?

[00:34:22] **Ms Lorna Merekaje:** That is a very very interesting question. And it's a question sends my mind to think of so many, so many currencies, and as activists, we would say 'aha moments',

so many 'aha moments' my mind goes to because yes, as, as part of the human right defenders network, one is the context within which we operate and you realize that your rights cannot be realized out of our way, or in exclusion of existence of [00:35:00] systems and legal framework.

[00:35:02] We're, in a situation where this is a country with very weak legal system and legal and the entire system, that country is quite weak. So that poses a challenge to human rights defenders. Yes, this is a rights issue. You're raising this particular issue, but then on the other side, you'd realize that the legal framework lets you down.

[00:35:27] So it will be difficult for you to push until realization of that. That makes it very difficult for human rights defenders network, to be able to implement. Number two is expectation as the name says: human rights defenders network. So everybody thinks the network has a mandate to protect them in always, but the network has limited resources.

[00:35:55] The network has limited number of people who are [00:36:00] actually there to stick their neck out for the sake of somebody, the network has limited number of people who would be able to run around and be able to look at different aspects because rights have different dimensions. So the human rights defenders network is actually having that kind of dilemma where, where we need to deal with the expectation, but also their mandate and the resources at hand.

[00:36:27] That is a very big challenge. And sometimes we find ourselves very lonely, to be honest, because when things are okay, we are very few and the network is very thin and And especially when the network is picking up on conversation or even plus different rights activists in the country, are picking on issues of legal environment issues on.

[00:36:57] On the action of political [00:37:00] elite in the country, you realize that not many people want to support us. One because there's money on the other side. Number two is this power on the other side. Who wants to align? That becomes very difficult

for us. And also as human rights defenders, I there my colleagues out there.

[00:37:16] We bear witness with me. We live a very dedicated life because there are several locations where we come in to defend somebody because we basically know that this is a right and a person's right must be defended and they must be allowed to enjoy their values as human beings and that is fundamental. But then in the process, the same person shifts again. And you realize that person is on the right side

[00:37:47] Which then presents set up as a betrayal and all the time, we'll find ourselves in a situation where we we are being told so and so is okay and you will see, so, and so on the [00:38:00] other sides, which you think they shouldn't be, and they seem to be very comfortable. So sometimes it's a very difficult thing. We deal with that. And we try, we try our best to understand the context.

[00:38:16] And understand our reality as South Sudan.

[00:38:20] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Animu and Merekaje, you are both human rights defenders having walked separate, but similar paths in your professional and personal journeys. Merekaje, if I could start with you. What started and propelled your passion for being a front liner fearlessly and unapologetically standing and speaking for those who are not able to?

[00:38:47] **Ms Lorna Merekaje:** I think it always takes me back before when such questions are asked. [00:38:51] I must say that for me, my, my approach and my, my inner belief is that [00:39:00]

[00:39:00] Until you know your rights, you will not defend anybody's rights. And in what, what pushed me to this point is one, the understanding that I have a right, and this comes right from home, you know, I, I tell people that when growing up, I'm one of the youngest, you know, the I'm the second to the last, but you realize that, in our family there was space for everybody to speak their mind.

[00:39:32] We could challenge our parents. And if the idea we put on the table made sense, the family goes by that. I think that gave us courage because as girls we knew that if something was right, we would always be right. It can, it will always be white. It can not be black. And there's nothing in between. I think that formed the core of my conviction and [00:40:00] my belief that.

[00:40:02] Rights must be defended. And when something is wrong,

[00:40:10] call a spade a spade. it can never change. It will only like that. So I think, I think it's a, it's a point where one grows, see that. And that is not enough. There is needs to continuously build that. And that brings me to setting, personal principles, personal values. What are the principles that you stand for? And if you don't have those principles, then you would be thinking twice because tomorrow you might want to benefit from what you, what you're seeing out there.

[00:40:42] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Merekaje, it's, it's really inspiring to hear you speak about the role that a parent in your life, specifically, your mother played um, even then, um, before the days of independence and you know what embodies, you know, very reminiscent childhood [00:41:00] memories from your upbringing and what that means for you being a south Sudanese.

[00:41:05] Um, Animu, with the dawn of the new country and the promise, um, of, of, uh, of a new Dawn and, and new things hopefully to come. Does the idea of freedom resonate with you in your current situation? You've touched on this quite a bit. And in light of the question that has been asked about your personal and professional journey with what Merekaje has also just noted, you know, you think of a time when [00:41:35] from your childhood, something that seemed normal. Um, what is normal and what, what is the idea of freedom to you and does it resonate currently?

[00:41:46] **Ms Animu A Risasi Amitai:** Um, I mean, I, I think about, um, my childhood, I was a very active child. Um, so, you know, If it was the drama club, I was there. If it was sports, [00:42:00] I was

there, but mainly, I want to sort of reflect on my life as a sports person.

[00:42:06] I, I played a lot of sports, you know, almost to the level of professional sport. There is just something that I wasn't able to take one then. And I just remember learning. And I think even to this day, why I continue pushing and why I continue to moving forward is some of the lessons that we learned from sports is that you don't give up at the first try.

[00:42:29] Then you keep trying. You keep training yourself then you change strategy when you feel like, you know, the, you know, there's a stumbling block or there's a sort of block in your way. And I feel like those lessons have been very instrumental in my present day and in the type of work that I do. Where so many standing blocks are put in your way, and especially for a subject such as human rights or even women trying to [00:43:00] advance in, in politics, in a patriarchal society, you know, where you're not relegated to wife or spouse of.

[00:43:08] But you're a leader in your own, right. Sometimes that seems to be taken for granted, that it's taken away from you and what that memory of my childhood, what those reflections, those lessons that I learned at a time in my childhood, where I was optimistic, where I was invincible, you understand nothing would stop in my way.

[00:43:27] As long as I put the hard work in. Those lessons today, remind me that if you continue working hard, if you continue persisting and persevering, The future that you hope for, the future that you worked so hard for is possible. And I always have the mantra that wherever there is life, there is always hope.

[00:43:46] I just don't sing the thing to myself. And every time there's that difficult opportunity. Every time. I face myself with challenges, especially in the work that we do. You know, I can tell myself as long as I have life, there is hope.

[00:43:59] **Masechaba Mdaka:** As we draw to the end of this important episode, please allow me one last question. As we think

progressively about the changes we wish and hope for South Sudan, what is the new narrative you would like to see permeate. What would be your personal plea and hope for your country and the turnaround which will be cornerstone for reaching a different reform from what it is currently?

[00:44:20] **Merekaje** I would like to start with you. Perhaps in two phrases in brief summary, what does the dawn, the real dawn of a new South Sudan look like?

[00:44:47] **Ms Lorna Merekaje:** It's important for us to take a step back and start reconstructing the social fabric in South Sudan based on funds.

[00:44:55] Until we do that we will not be able to protect one's, [00:45:00] right. Or enjoy our own rights. And that was a big threat for South Sudan is a mission because then this traveling, struggling for possible. And then a massive collection of common good for personal interests will continue and will be.

[00:45:30] **Ms Animu A Risasi Amitai:** it's so sad that, um, this podcast is coming to an end, but really reflecting on independence and what South Sudan needs, and what should be the narrative for South Sudan? I was there at the independence, the third independence and we stood in the crowd and we were delirious from, you know, the happiness that, that came with it.

[00:45:57] And it didn't matter whether I was from [00:46:00] this political party or that political party or from this tribe to. And, um, as the hopeless optimist that I am, I think that there's still a real opportunity, a real and unique opportunity, um, for us, for each and every one of us to make a contribution towards the hope and the future that we aspire to house to them, to.

[00:46:23] I would like to really focus on what each of us in our personal capacity, what each of us in our personal responsibility can do. And it doesn't matter where you come from. It doesn't matter if you're elite or not. Um, is that when you have an opportunity to be in a position of responsibility, whether it's at a familiar level or organizational level or country level, Each and every day you

must ask yourself whether the actions that you do bring the promise of the future that you aspire to.

[00:46:57] And if every one of us each and every one [00:47:00] of us at the south Sudanese asked that question on a single day, every single day, I think that we can slowly begin to change the.

[00:47:16] **Masechaba Mdaka:** There are a number of things that stood out for me in this episode. The hunger for power and politics supercedes the need to defend and protect the human rights of the people of South Sudan. 11 years post independence and basic services such as education and medical care are still not available to the people.

[00:47:43] Merekaje Lorna highlighted the fact that we need to re-think what development and engagement with South Sudan and international aid agencies going forward. It seems that leadership did not fully appreciate the responsibility and magnitude of what the referendum and ultimately, independence, meant for South Sudan.

[00:48:09] The challenge of being a human rights defender, more especially a female human rights defender, is something that really impacted me. My right, Your right, Our right, humanity is for us All... This has been our second episode of "Let's talk human rights – the FNF Africa podcast exploring human rights issues". We hope you enjoyed it! The Friedrich Naumann Foundation sub-Saharan Africa (FNF) is an independent German organisation that is committed to promoting liberal ideals and politics in Africa such as human rights, the rule of law,

[00:48:51] democracy, innovation, digitization and free trade. By conducting campaigns, media events, seminars, workshops, study tours, cultural happenings and training courses the foundation promotes human rights including freedom expression, freedom of the press, children's rights and LGBTQI+ rights and engages against violence against women and capital punishment.

[00:49:22] If you are interested in our activities, follow us on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Simply check for "Friedrich Naumann Foundation Africa".