

Martha's Road: Smashing Stereotypes

Joe Munnely is social advocate for Irish
Jesuits International.



When Martha Kockedhia Dut speaks, she does so with a calm strength that hides the storms she has survived.

At just 25, she has lived through more upheaval than most people experience in a lifetime. Yet today she stands proudly in her city as one of the few young women breaking barriers in mechanics and driving – a field dominated almost entirely by men.

Her journey began in Rumbek, South Sudan, where she grew up with her parents and three siblings. Life was simple then. Her father,

a builder, worked hard to provide for the family.

But at 8 years old, everything changed as her father suffered a serious accident – a fall that broke his back and left him unable to work or care for his children. Soon Martha and her siblings lived with a cousin, but school became expensive, and they struggled to attend.

While her cousin's children studied, Martha and her siblings remained at home, doing chores and waiting for a chance that never came.

The family faced further challenges when they were once again forced to flee South Sudan for Kenya, living as urban refugees before moving to Kakuma Refugee Camp. Their time there was brief, and the family including her siblings later returned to South Sudan, leaving Martha alone in Kakuma.

Martha was just a child yet already accustomed to instability pulled from pillar to post.

But Kakuma gave her something she had not had in years – school.

‘I repeated Class 2 three times,’ she laughs softly. ‘First in Rumbek, then in Nairobi because I didn’t know Kiswahili, and again in Kakuma. But at least I was studying.’

All this time she had stayed with a kind guardian who treated her with dignity – a rare blessing in her turbulent childhood. By 18, she completed primary education. But barriers rose again.

Her uncle encouraged the girls to return to South Sudan for further studies but that promise of education would remain out of reach for Martha until hope and encouragement came – a Basic Mechanics and Driving programme at St Peter Claver Ecological and Computer Centre run by Jesuits. Martha’s heart immediately knew she belonged there.

Without help like yours such supports, especially for girls, couldn’t be possible.

She worked in a pharmacy, saved money, paid her own tuition, and enrolled.

‘I was one of only three girls out of 32 students,’ she says. ‘People kept telling me mechanics is for men. They discouraged me so much. But I told

myself, “Nothing is too hard in this world.”

For four months, she trained relentlessly. She learned tools, engines, repair skills and driving techniques. And when she graduated, the centre selected her for an internship – proof of her talent and determination.

Today, Martha can repair various parts of a vehicle. She drives confidently along the busy markets of Rumbek, turning heads and inspiring whispers: ‘Look! A lady is driving. South Sudanese girls are rising!’

She smiles whenever she hears those words.

She has now returned to education to improve her national exam average so she can pursue a diploma in mechanics – a dream she refuses to abandon.

‘Nothing is too hard in this world. Everything needs commitment. Girls can do anything – just give us a chance! We are the eyes of this country!’

Her message to the donors who funded her training is filled with gratitude: ‘If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be here sharing my story today. What you are doing is not helping me alone but the whole community.’

Martha’s story is not just her own. It is the story of every girl who has been told ‘you cannot’, every child who has been left behind and every refugee who still dreams.

She is proof that resilience grows even in the harshest places.

Irish Jesuits International (IJI) is dedicated to supporting those on the margins thanks to your support. You can find out more about IJI’s work by visiting www.iji.ie or call us today to donate: (01) 8366509.