

OPENING SOUNDS OF AHCOL AND MARTHA PUTTING TOGETHER DIGNITY KITS

Ahcol: Yeah, what I'm doing here, we're preparing the dignity kits. So, we actually do some of the material in arranging them in a different way and we put them together and after that we pack them in a small bag and then we put them in the dignity kits, so that's what we're doing now.

Meghan: And can you tell me a little bit about who's packing with you today?

Ahcol: Yes.

Meghan: Martha's shy over there. But she's waving.

Ahcol: I came with Excel Empowerment Center, my coworkers. So I'm here with Martha Dau and Adhieu Top. So we are three of us today. We came here to do this job with our core team. So that's where, we're three of us today. So and we are very excited to do this job together with the MCC, it's really good. And excited. Excited job to do (laughs). Yes.

Meghan: That was Achol Majjer. A couple weeks ago, I joined her and a group of women putting together dignity kits at an MCC material resources center in Manitoba. Dignity kits contain a re-useable pad system, and they are distributed in places where families may not be able to purchase menstrual supplies. Achol told me a bit about what's in the kits.

Ahcol: What we're doing here, we are actually arranging the dignity kit. What we have here is what is called [transport] bag. [Transport] bag is the one that we use to put the used fleece square. Secondly we have what is called base unit. So we put what is called a fleece square inside the base unit. After it gets full or after you use it, you remove it and put it in the transport bag. So we have like four of fleece square and the thick one and we have the small size four of them. And we also have three underwears.

Meghan: Awesome, and it looks like there's some instructions like a bit of a visual explaining. It looks like they did images instead of instructions so that people speaking a lot of different languages will be able to understand what's happening.

Ahcol: Yes, yeah.

Meghan: These kits have personal significance to Achol and the other women who are originally from South Sudan.

Some of these kits will be sent to their home country.

Last month was Part 1 of the dignity kits episodes. We met some of the people in South Sudan receiving the kits and the school counsellor educating the students on menstrual health. If you haven't already, be sure to check out that episode.

Today on the show, a story about a group of South Sudanese women who formed a sewing circle that became so much more.

I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

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Meghan: The Excel Empowerment Centre (also known as TEEC) offers programming to war-affected newcomers, particularly women, girls, youth and children. In Winnipeg, they provide English lessons, sewing lessons, child care, trauma healing, health and wellness workshops and community. They also work in Bor, South Sudan, where they built a community center that offers vocational training, educational workshops and cultural events. The center serves as a hub for conflict resolution efforts, providing mediation services and supporting grassroots initiatives to address intercommunal tensions.

The woman who started it all, is Rebecca Deng.

Rebecca: My name is Rebecca Deng. I am the founder of the Excel Empowerment Center, as well as executive director.

Meghan: When she was 13, Rebecca and thousands of other children fled South Sudan and ended up in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. These children, who fled to refugee camps in neighbouring countries, became known as the lost boys and girls of South Sudan.

Rebecca: So in my life story, there is a lot of horrible things happen. I was under abuse. I even lost my two children. And in that case, there was no one to comfort me, to get that love or hug. My ex was not there. He was with other women. And so, it was very difficult for me.

And that's why, I create organization to help other women and girls and even little kids and elderly, because they're the people who have been affected by the war a lot. And they're innocent. So, that add to my personal life, so being a refugees is like, you lost everything you, it come from nowhere from where you don't know. So for my life story from my family side, I was in a good life in my early age until age nine, and then suddenly (snaps), like that. So a child from a very, very beautiful life, very good life, a happy a life and then like that suddenly and then lost my mom and then like that, so it become like consistently. That's why I thought that we, all of us as a human being, should arise for the goodness and instead of the war because it's not a good thing to experience. So it's a long trauma and TEEC now is a part of my healing. Because whenever I see what's going on in South Sudan, how it going, how it's going on now, it made me feel happy because I feel like we are making a difference. And I feel like this is what used to be done to us by other people. So we should do the same thing to others if we are here in Canada as a women will experience that one. And this is what unite us here. What unite us here as immigrant who came from war affected country is, you know, is experience that we went through all of us and, and and...

Meghan: As I'm hearing you talk, it sounds like you created the place that you wish that you'd had and you are the person to many other women that you wish that you'd you wish that you'd had. Do you think that's accurate?

Rebecca: Yes, true. True. So that's exactly how you put it. I create a place that I wish I would have seen in my life there. But I'm creating it for others.

Meghan: In the last few years, Rebecca and the women at TEEC connected with MCC in Manitoba, to learn how to sew. Women from TEEC began sewing blankets for MCC and helping put together dignity kits to send overseas. The dignity kits are personally significant for the women who remember having to stay home when they had their period. Rebecca recalls her experience.

Rebecca: When I was a girl in Kakuma refugee camp, we don't have those things. So when you came in when the menstruation, you don't go to school, because of you know, of this shame. So when we were in the refugee camp, the UN used to give us the quilt to support to support families for we use, it has like a blanket. So, that part, you know, we say here when I came here we say when we open the organization, I say we need to do quilts. And then from there, that how I connected with MCC. And then I find it in my heart where the MCC is doing is actually a big support to the to the women and girls has it was support before. So this is where we come in and do dignity kit because it is actually my story, my heart, my life. That how how I see MCC and that how we were involved with MCC.

Meghan: Do you remember what it was like if you're comfortable sharing what it was like for you when you first got your period? And what receiving a dignity kit might have meant to you at that time?

Rebecca: Yeah, it would have been amazing and it would have been encouraging because it will give me the power to go out and connect with others. And yeah, even though in our culture it's taboo to talk about period or menstruation so the girl always feel shame and you know and hide they don't even want they they feel like you know calm and I don't know how that feels like that time is really very difficult. So it is taboo. And these are the things that we need also and this is why it is best right now to talk about or to do dignity kit so, it would have been amazing it would have yes encouraged me to be smiling and give me freedom to connect with others.

Meghan: Because you could go about your life

Rebecca: Yeah.

Meghan: You wouldn't have to stay home

Rebecca: Stay home, no. And I wouldn't have even to look behind my my clothes. All the time to check myself.

Meghan: What is it been like to sew things that are being sent back to South Sudan like the dignity kits and blankets.

Rebecca: Ah, it's good. Because one, is a reflection and then contributing your volunteer time and your brain. So it really feels good. Because it's sharing and increasing the voice for the woman in one way and another because these girls that were sewing dignity kit are gonna go, they will not be like us. They will continue their education because they have support. As well to the blanket. When you are warm. You have your roof and you have a blanket to cover yourself, it makes you warm. And that warm, heart, you know, extended to others. You know I think that how I can put it. I think all women feel good about it. Because it is, one it is entertain them here because it is a technical work, it does not need need someone to go to school it just, brain put on it and then the measuring it, cut it from the cloth and put it together. It is part of trauma healing to me and has also it is helping others. So I don't know how those who are receiving them feel but for us here we feel good that we are making a difference. Because it seemed like it seems like nothing here in Canada, but it means a lot to people who get these blanket these quilts and the dignity kits, it means a lot.

Meghan: So you talked about you mentioned that that sewing the dignity kits and sewing the blankets is trauma healing. Can you talk about what you mean by that?

Rebecca: Sure. So what I mean by that is, it reduce isolation for the woman being home. It welcome them to talk together and focus on cutting, instead of their overwhelmed brain. You know, it reflects back for what was happening before. That is why I say it's kind of trauma healing. And I think it's something that, because right now we introduced that into in our programming for women to do sewing and it is very empowering actually. It empowering woman a lot. Because when you are sewing you are focusing on needle and how you will sew that you know line connect them together. So it does not give brain a chance to think about negatively what you went through. That why I'm saying that is a trauma healing process. You go into that world of sewing, you put your heart on it and you know bring you out from the house. You know focus on sewing, focus on machine and cutting and sewing. The long day, you go home you just already tired, on your neck, and that's why it says trauma healing.

Meghan: And if you could say a message to the young girls who are receiving the kits or some of the women receiving the blankets, what what would it be?

Rebecca: I would advise if for the girl, especially for the girl who are receiving the dignity kit, I will say do not take it for granted. Keep your education. Because education is the light of your life. If you get something like that, even your parents especially because some of the countries, especially my country, still forcing girl to be married in an earlier age. If you're a parent, forcing her to get married, I will encourage the girl not to accept marriage in a young age. But continue with your education. Because there is always a man that you can get married to, doesn't matter how old you are. But first get your education. Keep on with your education. You have someone supporting you beyond you get that dignity kit. Do not take it for granted. Keep your schooling. The world will change in your life when you have your certificate in hand, you can do whatever you want freely. And that's way I can say. For those who also would get quilt, you know, it's something that you, you, you, you use it for the family, do not take it for granted. Keep it for yourself and or even if you share it with someone know that there is people who are doing it, but they're doing it because they put their heart on you. And you want to the way you appreciate that, you know is you keep it. I was also thinking, how can I change myself to do the same thing like this, because learning how to sew is not difficult, you can do it. And then instead of wasting material, the material we sew sometimes came from donation. Why waste material, you can share and you can do something for your kid. So that's what I can I say, we throw a lot of material away. Especially in the West here. Or I think reusing them and make something out of it, it also meaningful and thinking of others.

Meghan: Those are all my questions, but was there anything else that you wanted to add?

Rebecca: I just want to say that I appreciate MCC. Because seeing when Sophia and others used to come down here to teach these women how to sew...because the idea came out but we [didn't] know how you cut it. The type of material that we used for the quilt. Sophia used to come here and you come here, Meghan. And then now we get empowered. And this is what we mean, woman to woman, is you know together we make difference. So I appreciate MCC for that and I hope, we hope all of us to continue working with MCC. And we also hoping also to invite MCC in South Sudan in South Sudan to come to our area, which is Jonglei state in Bor, to see our center. Has also to work with us, hand to hand over there. So, we need to encourage more women to involve at the grassroot level, to do so to train, to be trained, to know how to sew. It's not too late for the woman to go back and do activities, her own activities. Yes, the women who are getting married may not go back to school from ABCD. We can encourage them in terms of them to develop the small businesses so that they can support their children. So, I thank MCC

but I'm also encouraging MCC, for all of us to do more. That is, the world is to need our energy and our work. Together we can make a difference.

Meghan: Thanks Rebecca.

Rebecca: You're welcome, thanks Meghan.

Meghan: *That was Rebecca Deng, executive director and founder of The Excel Empowerment Center.*

TEEC has partnered with MCC in Manitoba since 2021. Building relationships, learning new skills and supporting our global neighbours who have been made vulnerable. TEEC sews comforters and reusable menstrual pad systems for MCC that brings practical support but also a sense of hope.

I feel lucky to have witnessed this over the past couple months I spent with the woman from TEEC.

Thank you to Rebecca for sharing her story. And also thank you to Achol, Adiheu, Agot, Grace and Martha, for hosting me, welcoming me and letting me record them while they worked.

These women are all volunteers. If you'd like to support the work they do and learn more about TEEC, I'll include a link in the show notes.

MCC is always looking for volunteers to sew dignity kits and comforters. I'll include a link to more information for how to get involved with that in the show notes.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was hosted and produced by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks and take good care.

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Show notes:

To support and/or learn more about Excel Empowerment Centre: <https://www.teec.ca/>

To hear Dignity kits part 1: Impact in South Sudan / Anne Kuria, visit: <https://reliefdevelopmentpodcast.libsyn.com/dignity-kits-impact-in-south-sudan-part-1-anne-kuria>

To learn more about MCC's material resources work, visit: <https://mcc.org/get-involved/kits>

To learn more about how to put together a dignity kit, visit: <https://mcc.org/get-involved/kits/dignity>