When I joined the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in December 2019, I did not realize the full significance of my role as a UN Volunteer Human Rights Officer. While preparing to travel for my assignment, I read a lot about the history and current affairs of the country to have an idea of what I was going to face, but I never imagined how this experience would change my life – for good.

Coming from Colombia, this was my first assignment in a UN Mission and my first time in Africa. Before this, I had worked in Guatemala protecting human rights defenders, an experience that informed my passion for human rights work.

Upon arrival in South Sudan, I was told by my supervisor at the UNMISS Human Rights Division that my main duty was to promote, protect and advocate for human rights in the world’s newest country, particularly in
Jonglei State. Since then, I have been engaged in human rights monitoring, investigating, analysis, advocacy and reporting on human rights violations, such as violations/abuse of international human rights and humanitarian law, including conflict-related sexual violence. These, to say the least, are no mean tasks.

When the first COVID-19 case was reported in South Sudan in April 2020, it not only had a huge impact on people’s lives and livelihoods, but also challenged the way the Human Rights Field Office was implementing its mandate.

I strongly believe that COVID-19 does not discriminate, but its impacts do. It does not respect colour, religion, sexual orientation, political opinion, ethnic origin, wealth status or any other status, however, there is clear evidence that this crisis is disproportionately affecting certain communities and groups, such as persons with disabilities, and exacerbating underlying structural inequalities pre-existing in South Sudan. --Sandra Rodriguez, UN Volunteer Human Rights Officer, UNMISS

Despite the measures introduced in an attempt to reduce transmission and minimize the impact of COVID-19 (maintaining social distance, quarantine, lockdowns, restrictions of movement, etc.), the human rights work in Jonglei State never stopped: we continued human rights monitoring, investigated violations and conducted fact-finding missions, notably in areas where recent inter-communal violence had taken place.

Having served on the frontlines of humanitarian situation in the country, I have seen first-hand how COVID-19 has exposed and aggravated the
vulnerability of the least protected: children, internally displaced people, women migrants, persons with disabilities and persons in detention, among others. This is why monitoring and assessing the crisis through human rights lens, putting a focus on the most vulnerable, is crucial to ensure no one is left behind. --Sandra Rodriguez

My work as a Human Rights Officer in South Sudan has given me the opportunity to really connect with people; to engage with local communities and to advocate for the most vulnerable groups in the country.

My greatest message is that at this critical point in history, with a pandemic ravaging the world, this is not a time to negate human rights; it is a time when, more than ever, we need to stand up for the human rights of all and especially for the most vulnerable members of our communities.

As a female professional and humanitarian, I remain passionate and committed to promoting human rights tirelessly, honestly and without fear especially for the sake of the most vulnerable population around the world. This why I came to South Sudan. -- Sandra Rodriguez

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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 10: Reduced inequalities, SDG 11:
Sustainable cities and communities, SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals