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“I AM JUST A CHILD, NOT A BRIDE”

Zawadi (*not her real name*) was only 16 when her father tried to force her into marrying an old man. She was scared and confused as the same man was introduced to her as a cousin and lived in her fathers’ compound with them. Zawadi did not know what to do but gained the courage to confide in the LWF Protection focal teachers in her school who then referred the case to Child Protection resulting to LWF finding a safe place for her to stay. She wants others to know that forced marriage is wrong and that you can get help!

“At first I was told we were preparing for a family members’ wedding”

Zawadi aged 16, is a refugee from Somalia living with her parents in Kakuma Refugee Camp – Kenya. She is a grade 7 learner in one of 21 schools managed by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF – World Service) Kakuma refugee camp.



Earlier in the year, Zawadi’s father started constructing another house in their compound. Curious to know who the new house was for, she asked her mother and was told it was for her paternal cousin who was soon to wed, not knowing it was the same house they’d live in after their marriage gets formalized. She described the cousin as a man older than her father and who wasn’t even a registered refugee or asylum seeker in the Kakuma camp.

“At first I was told we were preparing for a family member’s wedding ceremony hence the need for the extra house, but after my father took me to have my papers forged to increase my age, that is when I knew I was the one to be married off.”

Zawadi adds that early February 2019, her father took her to a certain man whose identity she did not know, to have her age changed. Her teeth were counted to estimate the number of years that will be added without raising suspicion if ever the authorities asked for her identification card. After the assessment, the man informed her father that Zawadi was still very young and he may risk jail term over this particular case. This however, did not stop him from going ahead with the plans! A month later Zawadi and the cousin who was set to marry her had their passport photos taken in readiness for the wedding. She missed classes for several days and this got her teacher worried. Days later Zawadi resumed school and informed the protection focal teacher that she will not continue with studies because her father was set to marry her off in a matter of days.

“She cried, told me that she was too young and the man was too old. She insisted that she wanted to complete her studies, was scared and did not want to get married.” Says Zawadi’s teacher.

Zawadi’s teacher also reported that she was one of the best students in her class, well-disciplined and hardworking.

Upon receiving the information, the teacher immediately called the Sexual Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) focal person in their area who performed an assessment of the case then escalated the matter to LWF and UNHCR Protection. Zawadi was rescued and admitted to a safe shelter for girls and women who survived SGBV. The case was reported to Kakuma police station and her father, the cousin and the man who helped forge her age were arrested. Plans have been put in place to have Zawadi enrolled at Angelina Jolie Girls’ Boarding School to complete her studies in a safer environment.



“LWF helped me get shelter and accommodation at the Safe Haven; a shelter that takes in girls and women who have been through what I experienced. It wasn’t easy. Initially, I had a tough time from family members who made me think I made a mistake reporting the matter at school, as much as I knew the decision was right. No one should be made to marry someone against their will and not when they are children. I look forward to going back to school and rebuilding my life. I want to advise my fellow girls to be strong and courageous enough to speak up, never suffer in silence and be part of the change.” Says Zawadi.

An excited smile covers her face through the shadows of her mother’s old hijab. Teenage giddiness wash over her thoughts like a crashing wave at the thought of how close it had been to have escaped forced marriage. 16 years of age, 7 of those spent in school almost exchanged like dowry!

Kakuma refugee camp has witnessed cases of underage girls being withdrawn from school and forced to marry men of their father’s age. This has affected completion rates among girls compared to boys. In the early grades, the enrollment of girls and boys is at 50:50 but as they progress into middle and upper primary, girls drop out of school due to forced marriages, early pregnancies and teenage motherhood. As a result, few girls transition to secondary education and ultimately progress in their careers.

Amazingly, some of the girls rescued from child marriages and other forms of SGBV, enrol back in school and excel in their studies, more often occupying top positions in the national examinations.

Since the beginning of this year the Protection Focal teachers in each of the 21 primary schools managed by LWF in Kakuma refugee camp have been taken through a series of trainings to sharpen their knowledge and skills in prevention, detection and response to violence, exploitation and abuse of children. This has been a result of the integrated approach and good coordination between the Education and Protection sectors towards protection mainstreaming in schools. LWF is the lead implementing partner for UNHCR in basic education for refugees in Kakuma and Dadaab camps. In Kakuma, LWF also has the mandate to implement Child Protection in schools to ensure that children access quality education in an environment that is safe for their growth and development.

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