

Better HAG Uganda Halts an Impending Forced Marriage



16 yr old Mary Khainza* who was on the brink of being forced into marriage

*Names have been changed for confidentiality

Forced and/or early marriages are not only synonymous with rural Uganda but undoubtedly Africa at large. As a form of wealth generation, this vice is rooted within the traditions, customs and norms of many African cultures and the Bamasaba/Bagisu Culture found in the Elgon region of Eastern Uganda is no exception. It is quite apparent of the increasing child motherhood with victims in the age bracket 13-16 in rural Uganda. To many people's dismay, most of these girls are withdrawn from school and turned into 'merchandise' by their parents or care takers with impunity.

Mary Khainza*, a 16 year old Senior two (S.2) student at Magale Royal Integrated School wishes to become a Doctor in the near future upon completion of her studies. She lives approximately 6km away from school with her parents whose occupation is farming. Mary* approached us in the post-debate sessions for counseling-and this is when we got to learn of the acute situation she was entangled in. According to Mary, her father started welcoming 'bids' of dowry from potential sons-in-law when she was in S.1. "...last year, it was difficult for him (her father) to pay for my tuition, so he started telling me that I was ready for marriage and that many men were willing to give him the dowry he wanted...." Mary* says that if it hadn't been for her mother who was constantly opposed to the husband's move, she would already have been given away. Citing what the stage play had demonstrated, Mary noted; "*The play is reminiscent of my situation, it looks like I am Nandutu (13 yr old girl forced into marriage in play) and my mother is Nambozo (Nandutu's mother in the stage play who was constantly abused by her husband for refusing to allow the daughter to be given away into marriage at a tender age)...*" When asked how she wanted Better HAG Uganda to help her, Mary* said she wanted us to 'talk' to her father. She also noted that she was buoyed by the knowledge attained from the debate, stage play and the speeches that followed and that she was ready to reject her father's move out rightly and if need be seek legal redress.

The weekend that followed the visit to Mary's school saw Better HAG Uganda pay a visit to her home in a bid to lure her father into supporting his daughter's studies and reap better when she eventually realizes her dream in future. Mary's father who did not let us take any pictures through out the meeting (*we always seek consent before making any audio-visual recordings*), was at first mad at his daughter for 'reporting' him. The Better HAG Uganda team engaged him in an intensified counseling session where it not only emphasized the legislative implications of forcing his daughter into marriage but also showed him just how much he would reap if the daughter finished school. "...it's poverty bringing about all this, but I will try as much as possible to support her in school...I have learned a lot..." were some of her father's words in response to our counseling.

Better HAG Uganda made efforts to follow up her father with phone calls to ascertain the post-intervention atmosphere which was judged against the daughter's. We were pleased to confirm from Mary that her father's perception had significantly changed, "...now he only tells me to work very hard in school and also to always spare some time and join them (parents) on the farm so that we look for my tuition as a family..." Mary also noted that her father refers to Better HAG Uganda as her 'friends' "...he usually asks jokingly; how are your friends?, have you met again..." something we are very proud of.

We hope that we can continue to be 'friends' to many other young girls facing related problems.

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