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UNICEF SUPPORTS FIGHT TO END MARRIAGE BY ABDUCTION IN ETHIOPIA

ARSI, Ethiopia -- Fourteen-year-old Chaltu Jeylu was on her way to school when a group of 15 boys attacked her. They beat her and carried her off to a village two and a half hours from her home. Chaltu was a target of the traditional practice known locally as "marriage by abduction," and was subsequently raped by her attacker and fell pregnant.

According to surveys conducted by the National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia (NCTPE), the prevalence of marriage by abduction is 80 per cent in Oromia Region, where Chaltu lives, and as high as 92 per cent in Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR), with a national average of 69 per cent.



"In the previous years, it started as a cultural tradition. When (families) didn't have the money to pay the parents of the girl they abducted them," said Tsegaye Ayane, Vice Head of the Education Bureau in Sude Woreda. "It's a very serious problem in the woreda. At present the community recognizes the problem and now they are taking measure to bring back girls who drop out (of school) due to the abduction problem."

Many times the boy's parents agree to the abduction as they can not afford the dowry traditionally required in the region. Village elders often serve as mediators between the families and discourage the girls from pressing charges and going to court against their attackers. Even if a man is convicted of marriage by abduction, few serve more than a couple years in jail if any time at all. Chaltu ran away from her abductor and is going to court to try and get justice, but she faces an uphill battle.

Although she eventually returned to her family's home, she was rejected by her father who had received 400 birr (less than \$50) and a horse as payment by the abductor's family. Her father made her give her 10-month-old son, Gebril, back to the boy's family as compensation when he was forced to return her dowry.

"My father hates me still. He says go back to your husband, but my mother says no get an education," Chaltu said. "I'm very angry, because he should be punished, because he did illegal things to me. ... I would like my baby to be with me. My father and the elders made me give him back."

Marriage by abduction has many adverse effects on the girls and their communities including perpetuating poverty, violating the human rights of the girls involved, causing permanent damage to their developing bodies, encouraging the transmission of HIV/AIDS and forcing girls to drop out of school.

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“Marriage by abduction really means child rape,” said UNICEF Representative Bjorn Ljungqvist. “These girls are being violated physically and emotionally. We must work together to educate the boys, girls and communities as a whole that this is not an acceptable practice. We all must work together to stop these acts of violence.”

Those who have been victims of marriage by abduction are termed *gusumeti*, derided as non-virgins by the community. Girls who reject their attackers and return to their villages are shunned as are their families. There is immense pressure for the girls involved to accept their fate.

“The community doesn’t have a good attitude when she is returned. The (village) elders, when she comes back, will ask the parents to return her to her abductor,” said Yinabo Nura, head of the woreda’s Women’s Affairs Office. “If they say no, they are not respected. After she’s abducted, the community sees her as if she is married.”

As she recounts her story, 12-year-old Samara Umare Kedir nervously rubs her headscarf across her hand scarred from struggling against her attacker. She was out with a friend to collect water when a boy she knew tried to abduct her with his brother.

“When I went to the river to fetch water, he came at me. I was carrying the pot. When he picked up the pot I screamed. Then his brother came – one catching my left hand and one catching my right. They pulled me to the ground. My friend was screaming. They beat me with a stick until my fingers were broken,” said Samara. “I yelled loudly, but they continued to beat me until my relatives came, and they ran away.”



Samara is one of the lucky ones. Her attacker was sent to jail for three years for the beating she suffered. Rahel Worku, a 20-year-old junior nurse, treated Samara’s injuries.

“She was harshly beaten and her hands and legs were swollen. She was very weak when she was brought to me,” said Rahel. “They are very young girls and their bodies are not matured enough so they are injured. They are also affected medically and psychologically.”

UNICEF is working with the regional Education and Women’s Affairs Bureaus to educate students and communities that marriage by abduction is not an acceptable cultural practice but a violation of basic human rights. Elders are being sensitised to the physical and mental damage that is inflicted on girls who are abducted and being asked to urge the parents in their communities to keep their daughters in school. In addition, girls’ advisory groups are being set up at schools as a support network. For those who are attacked, they are being encouraged to take legal action to prosecute offenders and hopefully stem such attacks from happening in future.

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Thirteen-year-old Alfu Haji Aman is one such girl who is fighting her attacker in court. She was washing clothes with a friend by the river when she was attacked by five boys.



“I ran to my friend and then they came and pulled her to the ground. They gagged my friend so she couldn’t scream,” Alfu emotionally recounts wiping her face with her headscarf to dry her tears. “Two of them held her and the other three dragged me away. They took me to a house at sunset and after three hours they took me a long distance. When I tried to sit, they beat me. All the night we travelled. After a week, I lost my virginity.”

She was returned to her family after feigning sickness. Eventually, her parents and the family of the boy who had abducted her reached an agreement and thought the matter was settled. However, Alfu refused to return to her attacker. Two of her friends had been abducted, stayed with their attacker and dropped out of school, and she didn’t want to suffer the same fate. She says she plans to stay in school and hopes one day to have a career as a secretary.

“My parents allow me to study and complete my education. His parent and relatives see me as the enemy,” said Alfu, who now attends the sixth grade. “I don’t feel ashamed. I want there to be strong measures taken, and he should be punished. Our traditions, customs and norms support the men – this is my personal opinion. I hope it will change and make both boys and girls equal.”

“(Abduction) happens because of ignorance,” she added. “I don’t want someone to take me by force. I want it to be my choice with someone I love.”