

GIRLS EDUCATION FEATURE

ESCAPING MARRIAGE FOR SCHOOL



Meda Wagtole will be getting married soon, yet she is already planning her escape. "I want to finish school," the 16 year old 6th grader insists, "but I know that [my husband] will not let me. Running away is therefore my only option. I will go and live with my brother in Meki Town. He has agreed to take me in."

We are sitting under a tree on the grounds of Burka Chafee primary school, located in Bora Dugda Woreda (district) of Ethiopia's Oromia Region. The school is in the heart of rural farmland, a 20 minute drive from Meki Town where Meda's brother lives.

Meda's story illustrates one of the greatest barriers to receiving an education facing girls in rural Ethiopia, namely the hindering effect of harmful traditional practices. As Felekech Dumesa, vice principal at Burka Chafee School, and Meda's teacher attests, "in our community, tradition, the custom of arranging engagements for girls from the time they are infants, is the greatest barrier to increasing the enrolment of girls."

Meda was a little girl when her parents made the arrangements for her engagement. Ever since, they have been receiving cattle and other gifts from her future husband's family, as a form of payment for her upkeep where she is growing up, and a way of continuously reinforcing the bonds between the two families until the time of marriage. "This is a common practice in this area. Once the 'limena' or engagement has been arranged, it is as though her family is raising someone else's daughter," Felekech explains. "She no longer belongs to them, and any major decision regarding her future, including whether or not she goes to school, is no longer just their concern. This is a rural farming community where going to school has not been the norm for children, even for boys. There is the possibility that the future husband has not been to school himself, and will not want his wife to be educated. He may feel threatened, fearing that she may look down on him, or that she would not be satisfied with an uneducated husband, instead preferring a husband who has gone to school."

These considerations weigh heavily against girls and their chances to go to school. Other factors colluding to keep them out of school include the demand on girls to help with household chores, including fetching water, often from far away sources. Until recently the schools themselves have not been girl-friendly.

Six years ago, Meki became one of the targeted districts in the UNICEF assisted Woreda Integrated Basic Services (WIBS) initiative that was launched with the Government of Ethiopia - UNICEF Country Programme of Cooperation in 1994. Through the WIBS programme, UNICEF assists in the provision of integrated social development services to selected disadvantaged woredas in each

region of Ethiopia. The programme is designed to improve the conditions of children and women deprived of basic services, and aims to transform these woredas into development models for other woredas to follow.

UNICEF has been supported by the Norwegian Africa Girls' Education Initiative (AGEI), which seeks to improve enrolment rates, as well as the retention and learning achievement of girls, through the WIBS programme. A multi-sectoral package of interventions has been introduced with the aim of making conditions in the wereda more conducive for girls to attend school. These interventions include social mobilization and awareness creation activities, which are undertaken to convince parents to send their daughters to school. A strong effort is also made to ensure the presence of female teachers to serve as role models and counselors. The school environment is rendered more gender sensitive with the provision of teacher training, curriculum development to remove gender biases in text books and instruction, as well as the construction of separate latrine facilities for boys and girls.

Within the community, efforts are made to ease the burden of housework. Conveniently located grinding mills and water points reduce the need for girls to remain and work at home.

Community outreach through school anti-AIDS clubs in communities, in addition to their critical role in helping to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, are slowly succeeding in changing conservative rural attitudes about the value of an education. Overall enrolment rates have increased significantly. Convincing parents to send their girls to school has been more difficult, and this is reflected in the gender ratio at the schools. The overall number of girls has increased remarkably, therefore while ratios may not be on par, the efforts have paid off.

Ever since Felekech joined Burka Chafe School she has been serving as a role model for the girls there. Asked what type of profession they intend to pursue, most of the girls respond 'teacher!' Felekech and other female teachers have also been an integral part of outreach programmes that have penetrated the community to convince parents of the value of sending their daughters to school.

"When parents see us, they are immediately witnessing living proof of the benefits that can be gained from educating their daughters," Felekech remarks. "We are slowly succeeding in convincing parents to send their girls to school so that they can, at a minimum, learn how to read and write their own name. Getting the girls into the school system is the greatest hurdle that we face. Once the girls have gotten the flavor for school, they are strong in their fight to convince their parents to let them stay on. They fight until it is time for them to get married, often contesting the imposition of this fate on them. Meda's parents blame the fact that she has been going to school for her not wanting to get married now."

"My parents did not want me to go to school," Meda recalls, "but once I started I developed a great passion for learning and knew that I had to continue. I forced my parents to let me continue, but it has been a struggle."

Events during the last academic year, however, signaled that her family and the dictates of tradition would soon be calling for Meda to end her eager pursuit of an education to join the young man to whom she had been engaged since she was a little girl. In accordance with the custom of the area, Meda was circumcised one year ago in anticipation of her marriage the following year. Female circumcision is practiced, among other things, to ensure the fidelity and submission of the bride to be to her future husband.

Despite her predicament, Meda appears poised and confident. She exudes a steely confidence as she speaks. "If I am forced to, then I will go through with the wedding. I will do it not to offend my family, but if I find a way, my desire is to finish school. After I am through with the wedding ceremonies and I am out of my parent's home, I will run away to my brother. He is also a student, I have told him my plans, and he has agreed to take me in." Looking up she continues, "to be educated means to have knowledge. If I reach a high level I will not only be able to help myself, but also my family, my country, my people. The benefits will be many."

*For more information, please contact the UNICEF Communications Section,
telephone: 251-1-515155 or 444400; fax: 517111; e-mail: awalker@unicef.org*