

An illustration of a young girl with dark skin and braided hair, smiling and holding a large white bowl above her head with both hands. The bowl contains the text 'I WILL TELL YOU MY STORY'. She is wearing a red sleeveless top with colorful polka dots and a blue skirt with a yellow and green pattern. The background is a solid teal color with a dark tree on the left and a yellow ground at the bottom.

I WILL
TELL YOU
MY
STORY

Voices of eastern
african girls

*This book was written and edited by the **Jesuit Refugee Service Eastern Africa**, with the support of **Entreculturadas** Spain and **La Luz de las Niñas** project.*

*We would like to acknowledge the support provided by:
the JRS staff who facilitated the encounters with all the girls interviewed;
Aliya Shah, adolescent psychologist who supported in designing the activities with the girls to ensure the respect of the Do Not Harm principle;
Gemma Terol and MMMM Studio, for designing the cover and back pages of this book despite time and budget constraints;
Entreculturadas and La Luz de las Niñas project, that funded and made this project possible;
and above all, all the girls who spoke up and, despite of the trauma and hardship, decided to share their stories with us.*

*“Humanity has not yet understood that girls
are a blessing. Hopefully, we will acknowledge
it before it is too late.”*

Dominique Sigaud in
The Curse of Being a Girl Child
(P.h. Mensajero, 2022)



I WILL TELL YOU MY STORY

VOICES OF EASTERN AFRICAN GIRLS

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GIRLS' TESTIMONIES

Adid - ETHIOPIA

Nationality: Eritrean

Age: 13

Main Topic: Girls' role at home

My name is Adid, I am 13 years old, and I am an Eritrean refugee in Ethiopia.

I was young when my family and I came to Ethiopia, but I remember some parts of the journey.

I remember we had to walk for many days to reach Ethiopia and people were fighting here and there... I remember we had to travel by night to avoid the fighters and the government troops. We even had to sometimes run whenever we heard gunshots from far away, or any other sound.

It was not a nice journey...

For that reason, every time boys fight in school, I suffer a lot. It reminds me of the war and the suffering of my family.

Nowadays, I love my home! When I am with my parents, I know I am safe, and they will take care of me. I am very grateful for having them in my life, but not everything is so good... What makes me the saddest is that boys at home are treated different than girls. And I don't understand why!

We are 7 siblings at home, and I really enjoy it. However, when it comes to house chores, these are not divided equally... and that does not make me very happy.

Me and my other 3 sisters, we always have to wash clothes, clean the house, cook, and go fetch water. However, my brothers are always outside playing and having fun. And they are not even expected to do anything else!

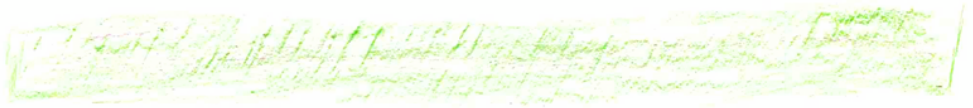
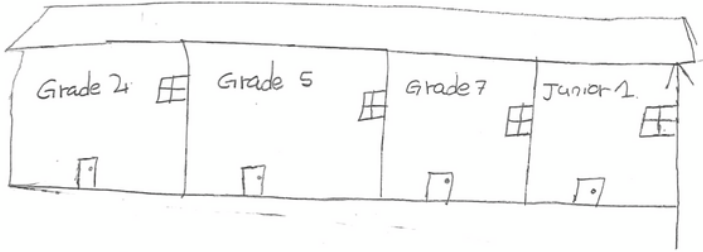
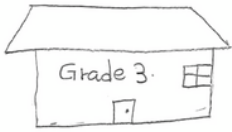
I feel boys are the centre of attention in my family compared to my sisters and me.

My brothers are not treated equally than us... when the eldest ones come home in the evening and we have not finished our chores, they get very angry.

I remember one day I wanted to finish reading the book our teachers asked us to. I decided to go fetch water first, then finish my reading, and after that end swiping the floor of the house. When my eldest brother came home from work and found me reading and not swiping, he grabbed a stick from the garden and started canning me. I cried until my mother came home... At the end I had no time to read my book and my teacher got very upset with me the next day. It made me feel very sad.

Honestly, I don't really understand why this happens... my mother says that, in our culture, boys should not work at home. But I still don't see the reason why.

What made me the saddest of it all, was when I spoke about it with my best friend Joseline. We were at school some weeks back, and my teacher got angry at some of us because we could not finish our homework the day before. Me, I could not do so because I had to finish the dishes before I could study, and having had neighbours for dinner I



had a lot to do before my homework.

When we left school, I was complaining about it with my friend, and she looked at me very seriously... she told me:

“Adid, why are you saying that? Home duties are women duties. Why would your brothers have to do something like that?”

Hearing my very best friend saying so, made me very sad... Am I the only crazy one who thinks there is no reason for it to be this way? Don't I have the same right as my male siblings to focus on my education and enjoy my free time? Or if we need to work at home, why should it only be the girls? If we all worked together, we could finish the chores earlier and we could all study and play and be happier!

Really... I don't understand why it is like that.

When I grow old, I will be an engineer living in London, and all my children, no matter if boys or girls, will not do any house chore apart from cleaning their room! I will provide for them so they can focus only on going to school and being good people!

That is what I dream. That is what I would have dreamed for myself...

I really like going to school! That is what will allow me to achieve my dreams! But the classes are full of pupils, we are all squished... it is always very hot in summer and makes it very difficult to focus... but I try, I really try, so I can fulfil my dreams in the future. That is the most important thing to me right now.

Also, at school we all have the same duties, and teachers don't differentiate between girls and boys when they have to give us extra duties like swiping the classroom's floor!

My favourite place in the world is the street between my home and the station where I take the bus to go to school. It is full of trees and some taller buildings, and that amazes me. Also, if I am walking down that street, it means I am going to school, and that always makes me happy!

I dream that one day people like my family and Joseline, whom I love a lot, can also share my view... I am unable to understand the reason why girls should be in charge of house duties and not boys.

I dream of a day in which girls can focus on whatever the boys do.

Because, as for now, in my community, it is not like this.



Christine - UGANDA

Nationality: South Sudanese

Age: 12

Main Topic: Menstruation as a taboo

My name is Christine, I'm 12 years old and I live in Uganda.

I live in a beautiful place named Moio, in northern Uganda border with South Sudan. It is very green, and the soil is so fertile that we never suffer from hunger. Unlike what I hear about my family members back in northern South Sudan. There is desert and they cannot grow all the fruits and vegetables we do. So, I feel very lucky for that!

At home we are five, and we are all women! My dad left us when I was too young to remember, so that does not make me sad anymore. Moreover, many of the girls in my school don't have their dads either, so I don't feel uncomfortable about that anymore. My mother is kind and hardworking, and I admire her a lot.

Since I was a child, I was afraid of getting my period... My mother always said it was a blessing from God and I must be proud of it when it arrives, but not everybody thinks like her. Older girls at school always complain about it being painful... And I know many bad stories related to it.

I remember one day we were in school. Our uniform is yellow. This girl in my class was sitting in the garden with us and when we stood up and moved to the classroom, the boys behind us started laughing at her. At the beginning, we did not understand what was happening.... Until she did, and ran away.

While she was running, I could see it: she had gotten her period and her skirt was dirty with blood.

She was so ashamed! The boys kept making fun at her... It made me feel very bad. After that, she did not come back to school for more than two weeks.
I don't want to suffer as she did...

Also, I have a neighbour who, when she is bleeding, her father makes her sleep outside the house. They say she is not pure, and she cannot share their home at night. What if she gets bitten by a snake at night? Or some men come to attack her? I would be so afraid!!

But the story that makes me the saddest is my friend's, Grace. Grace got her period recently, too. Her family, as most families in Moio, could not afford to pay for her sanitary towels or reusable pads. Consequently, every time she got her period she would not come to school and would stay locked in her house.

Me, I don't want to skip school... And Grace did not either. In a desperate move, she did what many girls in here do: she was approached by an older male neighbour who promised he would provide her with pads and soap if she needed it... but it was not for free. She had to pay him back with her body, the only thing she could offer him.



As a result, few months later, Grace got pregnant from that man, who rejected her and left her with a baby and no-one to cater for them.

If she had never had her period, that would have never happened!

She got pregnant at the age of 13 and left the school to take care of the child.

Me I don't want to leave the school; I don't want to have a child so early... I am still a child myself! I am so afraid...

Being a woman sometimes is too hard in here. I even often overhear my mom telling so to her friends.

When I explained my fears to my mother, she held my cheeks and smiled.

"My beautiful baby," she said, "it is only when a girl gets her period that she becomes a woman. Don't be on a rush for that, it will arrive when it must, but be aware of it as a blessing. Our bleeding is God giving us the power to give birth, to bear life in our womb, as I did with you and your sisters. If I had never bled, none of you would be here... and my little bird, the four of you are the most beautiful thing it ever happened to me.

Do you see the land blossoming? Do you see the fruits and flowers growing bigger and bigger? That is God's power of life. And that is also what your menstruation will be. God chose us to be the bearers of the seeds of humanity, not men. Don't be afraid of bleeding, my love, of becoming a strong woman, and embrace it when the time comes."

My mom is the wisest woman on earth, and if she says so, I do believe her.

It is true that many girls suffer when they bleed. But me I will not. And if I do, I will always remember my mum's words. I will be proud of it.

Now, I am ready to be that strong woman full of life, like my mom is.



Wilma - SOUTH SUDAN

Nationality: South Sudanese

Age: 14

Main Topic: Forced marriage and early pregnancy.

My name is Wilma and I'm 14 years old. I live in Yambio, southern South Sudan border with Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

I like living here. It is here where I was born and raised, and I have never known anything else beyond this.

At home, I live with my parents, my 5 siblings, my auntie and my 4 cousins. We have a farm that helps us provide for the family. I used to like the farm a lot when I was a child, but now, it is just a source of problems in my family.... And it is my fault.

I love school. I am lucky that I can go to class and that, despite struggling, my mother manages to pay the school fees. At least, most of the times. My dream is to become a midwife and help women like my mother give birth! I have seen how hard this can be when my mom delivered my youngest sister.

In my culture, as my auntie says, girls are a blessing to the family, because we are a source of wealth. When we reach

the age when we can get married, our families arrange a compromise with a male peer in exchange of lands, kettle, and money. But for that, you need to be “worth it”.

According to her, when a girl gets married, she must be able to do all the house chores: cooking, cleaning, taking care of the sick, the elderly and the children, farming and caring for the kettle. If not, you are considered a shame to your family for not being raised “the way you should”.

As a child, I used to understand that, but I was not aware how harmful that would end up being for me.

Many days my aunt request me to stay at home and go to work in the farm, instead of going to school. Especially when my mother struggles to gather the school fees for me. I hate it when it happens... more than once I had to be taken out of the school by the principal because he says my mom did not pay my fees on time. When that happens, I always cry! I want to go to school to become a professional and get a carrier. But my aunt gets angry when I say so.

“Do you want to be the shame of the family, Wilma? Why do you need to go to school and make your mother suffer to pay your fees, if at the end your only work will be to take care of your house, your husband, and your children? Girls do not belong to school. It is a man’s thing! Don’t be so selfish and work!” she always tells me.

I don’t want to make my mother suffer. I don’t want to shame my family, neither! But I don’t understand why to do so I need to neglect my education.

When we do not have enough money to pay the school fees for all, it is only my brothers who get sent to school. Even if



they are younger than me! Girls are not allowed to go for private studies. The families are not willing to pay much school fees because they say: “anyways, you will end up married to a man who provides for you”.

My mother still supports me, but at the very end, she also understands my aunt. Even herself never went to school and got married when she was 16. So, she would not enter a fight for it, and sometimes I end up leaving school to go to the farm with my mother and my aunt.

My cousin Julie got married last year. She was 14 years old, like I am now.

When our neighbour and far uncle came to ask for her hand, despite he was 30 years older than her, her parents agreed. The family struggles to provide for all, so they felt it as a good opportunity to help support the family needs.

Julie was one of the best students in her class! But she had to quit after marriage. Her husband did not approve her going to school.

She is now pregnant of her second child... She says she is happy, but I know Julie. She had big dreams.... But in my village, it seems like girls are not allowed to dream big.

At least this is what we saw with Salma. Salma was one of my best friends, she is five years older than me, but we had been playing together since we were children. Two years ago, she had the same experience as Julie: her parents accepted the marriage request of an elderly neighbour who had fallen in love with Salma's beauty.

Salma, however, was in love with a boy in her class. They wanted to get married someday. But her family did not approve. Her boyfriend was just a kid from a humble family,

while the neighbour was offering 50 goats for Salma's hand! Salma refused to accept the offer, so her father was beating her every day. They even chained her in her house one night! Seeing she was not willing to change her mind, they even beat up her boyfriend, as a deterrent.

But their love was bigger than that.

One night, she ran away, promising she would never be back until her family respects her idea. And she has not come back.

I see her mother crying every day. Out of frustration, maybe? Out of fear? Out of empathy?

Rumour has it she might be in a refugee camp somewhere in Kenya or Uganda... No one knows... I just wish she is fine. I miss her a lot. But I understand what she did.

I just pray I will not go through the same situation... but none of us knows.

I pray I will be able to finish my studies and become a midwife. And that, when I get married, it is with someone that makes me happy.

But where I come from, for a poor girl like me, such dreams might be asking for too much.



Joy - KENYA

Nationality: Rwandese

Age: 12

Main Topic: Child labour and school deprivation.

My name is Joy, meaning happiness, and I am 12 years old. I live in Nairobi although my family is originally from Rwanda. I have never been to Rwanda, and every time I ask my parents to tell me more about it, they get uncomfortable. I think they suffered a lot.

My mum only explained to me how they had to run through the forest at night for many days. She was carrying me in her back and my older sister in her right arm. While my dad was carrying my other two brothers.

I hear lots of stories from the horrors our people ran from, but it is never my parents who explain them to me.

I know my parents are in pain and they struggle to cover the costs of the family. We are now five siblings after the youngest one died of pneumonia two years ago.

My mother has never been the same since. She can barely work so she stays at home all day.

I am the fourth born, the second girl in the house. So, my parents always told me I must be responsible for the family and my younger siblings (now, sibling.)

It is for that reason I don't go anymore to school...

I love books so much! I used to love going to school, specially to the library. I love music, I sing, and I liked playing the piano.

I love my family, but things at home are not always peaceful... specially around the time we had to go back to school. My parents were usually very stressed because they made a promise to us that they will always take us to school. But my parents' financial status was really affected by COVID, that combined with the loss of my youngest sibling, left my mother jobless.

I remember how it started. I was being turned away from school by some teachers who were telling me my parents had not paid the school fees.

Every time it was happening more and more often. Until one day last year, my parents told me I could not go back to school anymore. I had to find a job to provide for the family as my older siblings were doing.

I will always remember my mother crying in a corner, and my dad staring at me serious and coldly.

I was only 11 years old... and my dreams were already chased away.

Since then, I have been selling cigarettes and napkins in the streets of the city. I walk for hours every day to come back with few shillings in my pocket. I see my dad getting upset when I get home with very little money, but I promise I try hard.

Few weeks ago, one day I had barely sold anything at all. I did not want to go home barehanded, so I stayed few more

e piano



hours in the streets trying to find any buyer. Night came too fast, and a man approached me. He grabbed my arm and was telling me things I did not want to hear. He wanted me to go home with him. I felt so afraid... the moment he left my arm I just ran. I ran as fast as I could. I ran for one hour. When I got home, I did not only bring barely any money, but I had lost some of the items while running. I remember how upset my dad got... So upset I was afraid to tell him the reason why it all happened.

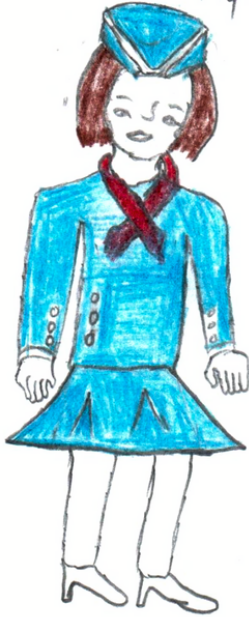
This is not the life I want. But it is the only way I can help my family now.

I love school because I can achieve my dreams only through it. I always wished to become a flight attendant and see the world. And hopefully one day see Rwanda, the land of my ancestors, even if it is from the distance of a plane. I pray and hope God gives me life and gives my parents the money to pay my school fees one day.

I loved school because there I felt safe. I felt safer when I was at school than when I was home. At home, they make me go out and work, go to the garden, take care of my younger siblings... While when I was at school, I felt safe, and I could work for my education.

I just pray one day I will go back, sooner or later, and become the person I want to be.

I wish to have good life with my family.
I wish to be flyattendent.



I wish to keep people safe
and safe there life and help
ing them. And I wish god to protect
me whenever I go too. To Guard
me.

Salma - ETHIOPIA

Nationality: Somali

Age: 11

Main Topic: Domestic and sexual violence.

My name is Salma, I'm 11 years old, and I come from Somalia. I moved to Ethiopia with my younger siblings two years ago.

When I was 9, life in Somalia was not easy, but I liked being with my parents. One day, our neighbour came to my home and started talking with my parents.

It seems she wanted me and my second born sister to get circumcised, like many girls in my community do. She kept saying that, when a girl gets cut, it is an honour to the family and the whole community.

I have heard about circumcision or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) before.

My neighbour and good friend Fatima had it done when she was my age now. She is 20 years old and always said I was a very clever girl!

One evening I found her crying at the door of her house. When I approached her, I saw some blood falling from her inner legs. It was then that I first heard about this circumcision. Fatima explained me that many girls get cut.

It is part of a traditional practice and a way of controlling women's sexuality, she told me. But many times, it is done in a bad way, and it creates health problems to women for the rest of their lives. She even told me it kept hurting her even nearly 10 years after it was done!

Since Fatima had told me that, when my mum came to me to explain what the neighbour wanted, I started crying. It seems my dad supported, to some extent, the neighbour's will. But my mother did not want us to go through the same she did.

This episode, added to the fact that life was everyday harder in my country, forced my parents to take, according to my mum, the most difficult decision in their life: to send me and my siblings to Ethiopia to a family's friend home.

It made me incredibly sad. I would have been even sadder had I known that it was the last time that I would see my parents.

Few months after, my hometown got attacked by Al-Shabab and, for what some neighbours told us, my parents got killed.

Now my younger siblings and I live in Ethiopia with my uncle, of whom I am a bit afraid. He is not like my dad. He makes us go to collect firework despite I always beg him not too. He looks at me in a weird way that makes me feel uncomfortable.

Last year, a girl in my town got kidnapped while going to collect firewood in the same forest I usually go. She disappeared for months, and we all thought she was dead.

Until one day, we found her in the market.

The girl was kidnapped by a man from our town, friend to her family. She got sexually assaulted in multiple occasions until one day they found out she had gotten pregnant. She got twins and now she has to work in the market to cater for them. She has never been the same, since then. And I don't want to face the same she has.

I heard that girls that get sexually assaulted sometimes end up pregnant or even developing diseases, such as HIV. This is what I am the most afraid of in this world: to get attacked, to get assaulted, to get kidnapped.

And I know when I go collect firework the chances of it happening are higher than when I am in town.

But my uncle does not understand me and keeps forcing me to go to the forest alone. I hate it!

Specially since my parents passed away, I had no other choice than doing so. If I want to continue going to school, my uncle says we need to bring some money home on the weekends. Otherwise, he will take us out from school and makes us work every day. And I don't want that.

My dream is to become a teacher so I can be always at school, and no-one can tell me if I can go or not. I want to continue learning as much as I can and maybe even become a headmaster.

The headmaster in my school is kind and understanding. She is one of my best friends! She always takes care of me and my younger siblings, and she believes I will do great things one day! Just like Fatima and my mother used to say.

I do believe I can do great things in life and take my family far from here. To a place where we can be safe from bad people and harmful traditional practices like FGM. I dream about getting a big family and providing anything they might need.

But, again, these are just my dreams. We never know what will happen. I just pray for my family, for Fatima, for my headmaster, and for myself, to have a peaceful life and never suffer from violence nor hunger.



Elyssa – SOUTH SUDAN

Nationality: Congolese

Age: 11

Main Topic: War and armed conflict.

My name is Elyssa, I am 13 years old, and I am originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Now it has been five years that I live in South Sudan with my family.

I perfectly remember our time in Congo... I remember the war that forced us to flee our home. I remember the men who killed my cousins. I remember the tears of my mother. I remember everything.

When we were children in Congo, there was some armed conflict between the government and some paramilitary groups. We used to live in a village that was peaceful, until one day the rebels came to our hometown. I remember people running away, screaming in fear, and looking for a place to hide. We did the same.

My family and I ran to the bush to find a place where to hide from the armed men. We spent two full days in the forest, looking for food in the trees, and watching that no one

would find us. At night I was afraid of snakes and other animals.

That was the first time we had to run to the bush. There were many more after that day.

One night we were at home with all my family, sleeping. The rebels came in the middle of the night before we could realise, and in a matter of seconds they were inside our home.

Three men. I will always remember... They took my two male cousins to the garden and shot them.

While we were burying them in the garden, my aunt went to the forest where we used to hide and killed herself. After that, I cried day and night because I thought I would also die soon.

My father made the decision to save us from the war in Congo. The day we left, on that morning, I remember some men in plain clothes coming home and asking for documents. Our dad asked me and my siblings to hide, but I didn't hide far so I saw everything. The men were rude to my dad and shot bullets... this memory keeps coming back to me.

Once they left, my dad told us we had to leave. And so we did: we took the few things we could and we crossed the border to South Sudan.

It has been five years since that day, and I still remember it as if it was yesterday.

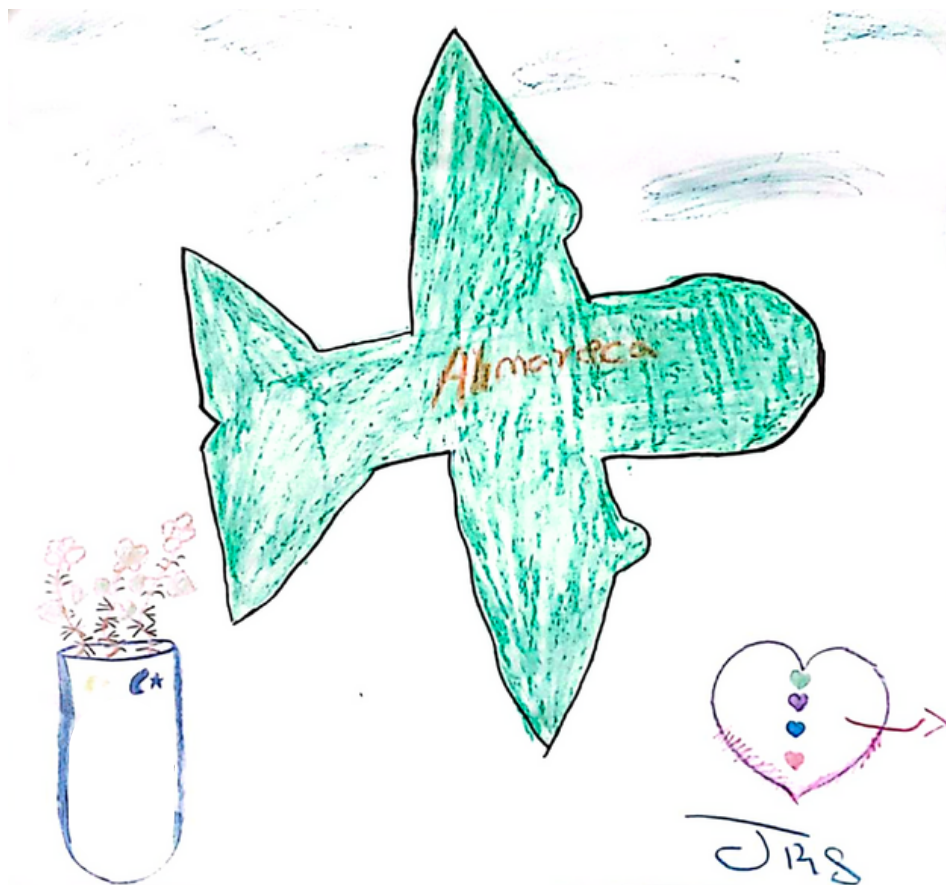
Nowadays, things at home are good but not peaceful and quiet. My father is a drunkard, and he comes home and yells at us. I heard that after the war, his brain was damaged, so I think he drinks alcohol to forget his problems.

I still have nightmares about the war. I saw lots of things I did not want to see and now I cannot take away those images.

Sometimes even when I'm in class I need to leave the classroom because I remember my cousins being killed in front of me and my siblings.

I like going to school, but I missed many classes because of the war and everything that happened. So, I am very delayed in my studies. I am 13 years old and am still in lower primary! I don't know if I have a big chance to go far with my education...

I dream about going to America, maybe to New York! I see in films people there are happy and have a normal life. Maybe there I will be able to forget, because here, everything reminds me of what we have gone through.



WHAT IS JRS DOING

JRS EASTERN AFRICA OFFICES:



WHAT IS JRS DOING

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is committed to accompanying, serving, and advocating the cause of refugees and forcibly displaced persons worldwide. In the Eastern Africa region we are present in six countries, (i.e. Kenya, South Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, Burundi, and Tanzania), while globally, JRS programmes are currently found in 58 countries across all the continents.

JRS's approach places special emphasis on serving the most vulnerable within forcibly displaced communities. And this includes girls: one of the most vulnerable groups in crisis contexts and those who suffer most from certain traditional harmful practices.

JRS' s mission to accompany and serve girls and to advocate for their rights takes different forms according to the various types of programmes and projects offered in the region.

Here are some examples of JRS Eastern Africa projects that serve the cause of girls:

Education

JRS is committed to ensuring inclusive education for all. This means education is accessible to everyone, regardless of their vulnerability: people with special needs, illiterate adults, and of course girls and young mothers.

We have gender-responsive education programmes, where we advocate the schooling of girls.

An example is the **Education Project in Adjumani Refugee Settlement, JRS Uganda**. To ensure girls' schooling, community awareness is important but not sufficient. This is why we offer a holistic programme that addresses the different reasons that can lead to girls dropping out of school in the region.

These are:

- we offer school fees, uniforms, and scholastic materials, so that families do not prevent girls from going to school due to lack of resources;
- we offer dignity kits to girls, including soaps and sanitary pads, so that menstruation is no longer a reason for girls not to attend school and early pregnancies are reduced;
- we co-ordinate, together with the Ugandan Ministry of Education and the Salama Radio station, radio lessons so that children who do not attend school for specific reasons do not miss classes during their absence;
- we build dormitories for girls so that they can stay in the school even after school hours, to reduce the possibility of child labour and make it easier for girls to concentrate on their school duties; and
- we have some groups of young mothers to accompany girls who have suffered from early pregnancies and to prevent this from being a reason for dropping out.

Know more about our Education Programme in Adjumani (Uganda)

If you want to know more about the education project in Adjumani (Uganda) and its focus on gender-responsive education, you can visit our website or watch the short video we made in 2022. In the video you will meet Charity, a young South Sudanese refugee and one of the participants of this programme.

Scan this code or click on it to watch the video.



Protection

As part of JRS's mission to accompany the most vulnerable, we have different programmes focused on the protection of individuals.

Although the concept of protection is transversal to most of our programming (e.g. promoting girls' education is a way of protecting them from harmful practices; or supporting women's income-generating activities is a way of protecting them from engaging in malpractices or being more vulnerable to abuse), we have some projects that specifically target the short-term physical protection of women and children.

An example is the **Safe Shelters Project in Kakuma Refugee Camp, JRS Kenya**. This project consists in managing two shelters in Kakuma Refugee Camp: Safe Haven, for women and children; and Amani, for boys between 13 and 18 years old. The purpose of this project is to offer a safe space for women and children whose lives or wellbeing are at risk within the refugee camp, and for whom the regular safe spaces offered by UNHCR are not secure enough.

The majority of women who access the Safe Shelter Project are women escaping forced marriage, whose lives have been threatened either by their own family or by that of their "future"

husband (Salma's character, within Wilma's testimony, is inspired by all these women at the Safe Haven).

Know more about our Safe Shelters Programme in Kakuma (Kenya)

If you want to know more about the Safe Shelters in Kakuma, you can read the testimonies of Arusha and B.S., through which you can better understand the relevance of this project as well as the shared realities of the women who benefit from it.

Scan any of these codes or click on them to watch the videos.



*B.S.
testimony*



*Arusha's
testimony*

Parallel to the work we do with women and children in Kakuma Refugee Camp, we also have a child-focused protection programme: **Child Protection Center (CPC) in Addis Ababa, JRS Ethiopia**. This whole project is focused on the protection of unaccompanied children (from education to mental health and foster care).

In many cases, the level of desperation of parents for a durable solution to their refugee status, prompts them to seek asylum as individuals rather than heads of families.

Resettlement in a third country as individuals tends to be easier than with the whole family, which is why many parents choose this option. Then, once relocated to Europe or any other third country, they start the processes for family reunification. Processes that can take many years.

In many of these cases, we work with unaccompanied children in Ethiopia: we locate the family, support the process of family reunification with UNHCR, provide mental health and education services to the children, and look for foster care families for them while they remain in Addis Ababa.

Know more about our Child Protection Center in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)

If you want to know more about the Child Protection Center in Addis Ababa, you can read the testimony of Maryam and Yunnes, two young Eritrean sisters awaiting to be reunited with their mother. To get a more detailed understanding of the CPC project, you can watch the video linked here.

Scan any of these codes or click on them to watch the videos.



Maryam and Yunnes testimony



Child Protection Centre video

Livelihoods

JRS has always been committed to promoting the resilience of refugees.

In many cases, one of the main reasons behind child labour or early marriages is financial hardship of the family. For this reason, supporting the livelihood and income-generating activities of tutors within a family is one way to prevent children from being taken out of school at an early age.

This kind of programme is common to nearly all our offices in the region. One example is our **Livelihoods and Vocational Training Programme in Adjumani, JRS Uganda**. This project combines vocational training (tailoring, salon, computer...) with market linkages to facilitate refugees to create an income-generating activity.

Moreover, we try to promote young mothers' engagement in such projects to give a gender-focused approach to our programming and support the livelihoods of vulnerable girls and their children.

Know more about our Livelihoods and Vocational Training Programme in Adjumani (Uganda)

If you want to know more about the Livelihoods project in Adjumani (Uganda), you can visit our website or read Jackline's testimony: a young mother whose life and that of her baby girl were greatly impacted by the tailoring lessons received.

Scan this code or click on it to access the story.



Reconciliation

Considering that women and girls are the most vulnerable in conflict situations, all our Reconciliation programmes also protect and defend the rights of girls in the region.

As part of our commitment to peace and sustainable development, JRS conducts several reconciliation projects in the region. From Community Leaders' discussion groups, to awareness raising sessions and the promotion of Peace Ambassadors, we offer many different kinds of Reconciliation activities in our countries of operation.

A good example is the **Reconciliation Programme in Dollo Ado Refugee Camp, JRS Ethiopia**. This project consists of ongoing work with Somali Clan Leaders in Dollo Ado area. We offer spaces for peaceful discussion among clan leaders, especially when potential conflict arises. In this way, we support the dialogue among different clans as an easier resource than the use of force or violence among clan members.

Know more about our Reconciliation Programme in Dollo Ado (Ethiopia)

If you want to know more about the reconciliation project in Dollo Ado (Ethiopia), you can visit our website or read the testimony of Abdikadr Abdi, a Somali clan leader and participant in our project. Through his testimony you will understand better the role of this project and its relevance in the context of Dollo Ado.

Scan this code or click on it to access the story.



In parallel, and as part of the Jesuit educational vocation of JRS, we also work in schools to promote peace and non-violent conflict resolution. We organise peace clubs in different schools throughout the region as well as Peace Trainings.

One of the most significant examples are the **Peace Clubs in Ruyigi schools, JRS Burundi**. Combining students of different ages, we meet with them regularly to teach the concepts of peace, non-violence, and dialogue. These children become Peace Ambassadors themselves in their respective schools and contribute to spreading the message about the importance of non-violent conflict resolution.

By involving children from an early age, we promote the upholding of these principles and make the actors of tomorrow the main promoters of peace.

Know more about our Peace Clubs in Ruyigi Refugee Camp (Burundi)

If you want to know more about the reconciliation project in Ruyigi (Burundi), you can visit our website or watch the video about the Peace Club in Ruyigi School. Through the testimony of Ange, JRS facilitator, and two of her students, you can see the relevance of this kind of project in the Burundian context.

Scan this code or click on it to access the story.



Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

Trauma, injuries or even the orphanhood of tutors can lead to children dropping out of school to earn a living or support the family in the face of parental or tutor inability.

Many of the people we work with have undergone traumatic experiences that invalidated them mentally or physically.

As a result, many of them struggle to find stable work that allows them to provide for their families.

In many cases, it becomes the responsibility of the eldest children to provide for their families, even if this implies dropping out of school at a very early stage.

In addition, when focusing on the reality of girls, this is accentuated when it comes to menstrual hygiene items. In some communities, as we have seen in Christine's story, menstruation can be considered taboo. But this does not prevent girls from bleeding every month. It is common, especially in rural areas, that the combination of financial hardship and the taboo associated with the menstrual cycle of girls, can lead to early pregnancies. Why? When families are unable to provide tampons or other menstrual hygiene items to their girls for any reason, some of them tend to make deals with older men in the community to get the pads. These men offer the girls soaps and pads in exchange for sexual favours, which can lead to early pregnancies and, again, school drop-outs. As part of our Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) programmes, we also provide sanitary pads and other hygiene items to reduce the incidence of such activities.

The work we do on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support also has an impact on the protection of children in general and girls in particular.

An example of the MHPSS programme is the **Sudan Crisis Response in Renk, JRS South Sudan**. The conflict that erupted on early 2023 in Sudan resulted in the forced displacement of thousands of people to neighbouring countries, mainly Egypt, Chad and South Sudan. JRS EAR has been present on the border with South Sudan to respond to the needs of people fleeing Sudan.

One of our main activities, in addition to Physiotherapy and Counselling services, as well as the provision of childcare services, has been the distribution of reusable sanitary pads and soaps for girls and women in reproductive age. The purpose of this distribution of hygiene items is to reduce the stress of families and women and ensure a dignified and healthy menstrual period.

Know more about our Sudan Crisis Response in Renk (South Sudan)

If you want to know more about the Crisis Response in Renk, you can visit our website or read the articles linked about our presence and response in the area. Through the testimonies of Batika or Wilium you will understand better the magnitud of the humanitarian crisis in Sudan and the importance of the work of NGOs like JRS.

By reading the story of Marie you will know more about the relevance of Non-Food Items (NFIs) distribution.

Scan any of these codes or click on them to watch the videos.



Batika and Wilium's testimonies



Marie Testimony on NFI distribution

Advocacy

Last but not least, one of the three main pillars of JRS is to advocate for the rights of refugees and forcibly displaced persons. This, again, including the rights of girls.

Our advocacy for the rights of vulnerable displaced communities is a crosscutting element in every programme and every effort that JRS EAR and JRS globally undertake.

This is done by: raising their voices in exercises such as this book you are holding, participating in working groups to discuss the different challenges faced, organising focus groups where refugees can express their concerns or needs... among other things.

We do not have exclusive advocacy projects, but we do advocate for all the realities we encounter in all our projects, both in the field and at the institutional level.

An example of a project with an advocacy element is the **Education and Climate Project in Kinama, JRS Burundi**.

Burundi is a country that has been severely affected by the interference of weather and climate change. Being a poorly urbanised territory with scarce economic resources and a population with low levels of education, the impacts of climate change have been considerable.

This has particularly affected rural schools and consequently the schooling of young boys and girls.

For this reason, and despite the fact that JRS has not worked directly on climate-related issues, we have started to advocate for this reality and are trying to raise funds to rebuild and support the worst affected schools in the area of Kinama (Burundi).

Know more about our Education and Climate Project in Kinama (Burundi)

If you want to know more about the Education and Climate Project in Kinama (Burundi), you can visit our website or read the article about Rugasara and Gisoko schools. Through their stories you can see the relevance of advocating for the environment in the Burundian context.

Scan this code or click on it to access the story.



WHAT CAN YOU DO

WHAT CAN YOU DO

As common humanity, we have the moral obligation not to ignore the realities explained in this book. All the Adids, the Christines, the Wilmas, the Elyssas, the Joys, and Salmas in the world are also our sisters and we cannot ignore them.

You might what you could do from where you are. And initially the options might seem few. But they are not.

No matter your age, your country of origin, your occupation, your gender, your capacity... **you can make a change**. You have a voice that can be raised and that gives you power to influence this world. Even from the furthest corner of the planet.

But let us list you some more specific ways you can make a change for girls in vulnerable situations around the world. To make it easier for you.

Here are just few things you can do from where you are:

1 - Spread the word!

The easiest but equally important possibility of action: talk about it. Let people know, when the opportunity arises, that these things are still a pressing reality to many girls in the world. Do not ignore. Speak up!

By acknowledging the existence of this reality, we help educate society and make it more difficult for the community to be oblivious to it.

What we don't know, what we don't say, does not exist. Let's avoid this being the case with gender-based violence suffered by vulnerable girls.

2- Learn more and Advocate for them!

If you want to influence the world, you first need to know more. Read, inform yourself, and learn about the violences suffered by girls not only in Eastern Africa but all over the world (starting from your neighbourhood).

By knowing, we give more value to our statements. Having an informed opinion will push your position forward and help influence how others see this reality.

Finally, use this voice and opinion. Participate in public forums, support peaceful demonstrations or civil movements, or attend conferences on the topic. In this way, you can engage with individuals, law makers or

institutions that can have a real and significant impact on girls' rights.

Advocacy starts with the individual. If you are able to influence the opinion of one person, you have already made a huge change!

3 - Support JRS programmes

If you don't have the time to engage in movements for the defence of human rights, you can support others to do so.

You can engage with NGOs like JRS or Entreculturas by sharing and echoing their content on social media or websites to help raise awareness of the reality of girls and the need for the work of NGOs.

You can make regular or punctual donations to JRS or similar organisations to help them continue with their work with girls all over the world.

Or you can organise a fundraising event in your school, parish, workplace, or neighbourhood to support the humanitarian projects in Eastern Africa or elsewhere focused on defending girls' rights.

(To know more about how to make a donation, you can visit our website: <https://jrs.ear.net>)

4- Volunteer or Work with Us

Finally, you can choose the most direct and engaging option: working for change!

By volunteering or working with JRS or any other NGO fighting for girls' rights, you can dedicate your time and efforts to changing this reality.

Why donate or spread the word when you can go to the field and work side by side with girls and their communities?

But listen, this is just an option. All of the above are equally important!

"SAFE AND SOUND"

"SAFE AND SOUND"

All I want
is to feel safe and sound.
I want to stay beautiful and educated.
Don't beat me, don't insult me.
Give me my rights, please!
All I want
is to feel safe and sound.

I don't want to get married early.
Don't sexually harass me.
Allow me to achieve my dreams rightfully.
Give me my rights, please!
All I want
is to feel safe and sound.

I want to be respected.
Don't take away my opportunity
to lead just like the other gender.
I am a girl and I have needs
that should be fulfilled.
Give me my rights, please!
All I want
is to feel safe and sound.

This poem has been written by one of the girls participating in the story telling for the edition of this book.

CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS

The stories of Adid, Christine, Wilma, Elyssa, Joy, and Salma, are not fiction. On the contrary: they represent the reality of thousands of girls in Eastern Africa and around the world.

Some of the realities explained may, to some readers, be perceived as very distant in space and time, but they are not. Harmful traditional practices can be found all over the world, in underdeveloped, developing and developed countries, regardless.

Forced marriages, early pregnancies, sexual and domestic violence, wars, abductions, gender roles, school deprivation... are only some of the major violations that girls suffer worldwide. And it is our responsibility as humankind to stop them.

It is urgent that we all join efforts to advocate for this reality and to achieve a profound change in the mindset of our common cultures, where girls are considered second-class persons.

If we want a stable, and developed world, we need to start by empowering girls and women.

While women use their voices to defend their rights, girls continue to be silenced by the status quo and social norms around the world.

We dream of a day when these stories will just be history.

When we will be able to say that the stories explained are fictional and belong exclusively to the past. When our work with girls will no longer be necessary.

Until then, as humanity, we still have a long way to go.

Until the fundamental rights of every girl are respected globally, we will not have succeeded as humankind.

Girls are the seed of humanity. As Dominique Sigaud writes in her book *The Curse of Being a Girl Child* (original title: *La Maldición de Ser Niña**):

"This world needs to understand that girls are a blessing. Hopefully, we will acknowledge it before it is too late."

* *La Maldición de Ser Niña*, by Dominique Sigaud (publishing house: Mensajero, 2022), is a book funded by Entreculturas Spain and Luz de las Niñas focused on describing the different violences suffered by girls all over the world.

Know more about the work of JRS and get more testimonies of forcibly displaced persons in Eastern Africa by visiting our website or any of our social media channels:

JRS EAR Website: ear.jer.net

JRS International Website: jrs.net

Twitter: [@JRS_EastAfrica](https://twitter.com/JRS_EastAfrica)

LinkedIn: [Jesuit Refugee Service \(JRS\) East Africa](https://www.linkedin.com/company/jesuit-refugee-service-east-africa)

Facebook: [Jesuit Refugee Service East Africa](https://www.facebook.com/JesuitRefugeeServiceEastAfrica)

Instagram: [@jrs_eastafrica](https://www.instagram.com/jrs_eastafrica)

*Book compiled and edited by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)
Eastern Africa.*

Funded by Entreculturas and Luz de las Niñas Spain.

Interior drawing done by girls beneficiaries of JRS Eastern Africa.

Front and back page design by MMMM Studios.

This book of stories is a compilation of true testimonies of girls under 15 years old in the Eastern Africa Region.

The voices of these girls reflect real stories and experiences of many other girls in the region and in the world, who suffer different kinds of gender-based violence. From schooling deprivation, to forced marriages or early pregnancies, child labor and sexual violence; just a few of the many cases we, as Jesuit Refugee Service and Entreculturas, have encountered.

Not using real names nor personal details for protection concerns, all the information shared in this book is real.

The Jesuit Refugee Service Eastern Africa, with the support of Entreculturas Spain, have been implementing projects and advocacy campaigns in the region and beyond for many years, to raise awareness about, and reduce the episodes of violence suffered by girls and women.

The purpose of this book is to shed some light of how, some of these violences, are still a prominent reality in some parts of the world, as well as to promote further action or activism from our areas of influence to fight against this reality.

The drawings accompanying the stories have been made by some of the interviewed girls themselves, and the illustrations in the front and back pages have been proved by MMMM Studio, by the graphic designer Gemma Terol.