

#HELMSHURTS Story: Somalia

Amal, 35: Woman with Disability

"Amal" is a 35-year-old woman with a disability. She had never married due to her paralysis in one leg and arm. She has no family. She was struggling day to day to support herself, living in camps and even in the bush.

Then, one day, she was raped. She became pregnant.

She tried to hide it, and sought out one of the old men or women known to use "traditional remedies" of mixed bark and seeds and random pills to abort the pregnancy.

It didn't work. She gave birth, but the baby was a very low birth weight.

Amal is now staying in the Sister Somalia center with the baby who is "tiny, so tiny- two months old it still looks like a newborn. Very weak."

She still doesn't want the baby. With her disability, life was already a struggle, and she has no idea how she will care for the child or survive day to day.

Kaltuun, 17: Forced Marriage

"Kaltuun", a 17-year-old girl, desperately wanted out of her forced marriage. The husband was more than three times her age, beat and raped her often. She repeatedly ran back to her family's home, begging for them to let her move back with them.

But before she could convince her family to take her back, she became pregnant. She was clear: She did not want to have the baby – it would mean being trapped forever in this forced marriage.

Without options, the prospect of her future was so horrifying, at 8 months pregnant, she walked outside her husband's house, doused herself in gasoline, and set herself on fire.

She lived, but with severe burns. She ended up at the Sister Somalia center, where she stayed. But her husband has now moved in with her family, leaving her nowhere to go when she leaves.

Iman, late 30s: Calls from Shabaab

"Iman", in her late 30's, already had 7 children with her husband. One day, when she went to collect water, she was gang raped by Somali government soldiers.

She became pregnant. Unable to accept the situation, her husband not only abandoned her, he took all 7 of her children and moved back to territory controlled by al-Shabaab.

The calls from al-Shabaab began after she gave birth. In Somalia, anytime al-Shabaab targets someone, it is an extremely dangerous situation. They were clear: You have a baby that doesn't have a father. You better kill that baby or we will kill you.

Iman believed her husband was behind the calls: He wanted her to care for her seven children, but would never accept a baby that was not his.

But in Somalia, this is not an idle threat. Several women who have been raped were later stoned to death by al-Shabaab for "adultery."

This woman would not murder her daughter, now a year and half old, so the threats have continued, unrelenting. Shelter staff have developed a plan to secure her safety, in which she will give the baby to the center and tell al-Shabaab she killed it. Then she can reunite with her other children.

Hodan: Torture as Abortion

A few years back, "Hodan", a young girl staying at the center was pregnant from rape, though she told no one. Through back channels, she went to someone who, for a fee, stomped on her stomach and back until she bled. They assumed the

fetus was aborted. She was supposed to come back a couple of days later to drink an herbal concoction designed to expel the fetus. But the girl didn't have the money, so she never went back.

The fetus never came out. When she was nine months pregnant, she finally confided in center staff that she was about to go into labor, though she hadn't felt the baby moving in a long time.

She gave birth. It turned out, the baby lived.