

Project Refuge

Client Profile: “Baahila” from Ethiopia

*The following true story is presented as an example of the plight endured by refugees who can benefit from Project Refuge services. Names and identifying details have been changed to protect client confidentiality. **Warning:** The descriptions of hardship and persecution suffered by client families may include graphic violence.*

Baahila is a 22 year old single woman from the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. As a child, her father owned a general store and her mother was home with the children. Baahila enjoyed attending school until the 8th grade, and was a good student.

However, she was a very worried child. The Ogaden region, occupied by the Ethiopian military, was never peaceful in her lifetime. The ONLF party was battling the military for independence of the region, and innocent townspeople were often victims of the conflict. To discourage support for the ONLF, the Ethiopian military randomly accused people of supporting the party, with brutal consequences. Baahila witnessed horrible violence. As a young girl she watched as women and young girls were raped, and their parents dragged from their homes and killed in public. Kidnappings were frequent, and bodies were dumped in the streets to frighten and intimidate the populace.

Baahila’s family was not involved in politics or the ONLF. They just wanted to be left alone to lead their lives, run their business and raise their children. Yet when Baahila was 19 years old, the Ethiopian military came to her grandparents’ house, next door. The military abducted two uncles and an aunt, and dumped their lifeless bodies in the street three days later. Her aunt’s breasts had been cut off and she had been left to bleed to death; her uncles had been tortured and murdered.

Several years later, soldiers burst into her father’s store at night, abducted her brother who had been sleeping there to protect the premises, and burned the building to the ground. They brought her brother to the family home, and took Baahila and another brother. Her parents tried to protect them, and were severely beaten. Baahila was dragged out of the house by her hair.

She spent the next five months in jail, where she suffered multiple beatings and attempted rapes. Her younger brother was taken to another town, and has not been heard from since. Her older brother was hanged, and his body dumped by her cell. She passed out at this horrific sight. Baahila was told the same would happen to her. She was released only after her father enlisted community elders to bribe the prison officials – but the soldiers said they would come back for her. When they arrived two days later, Baahila was gone. She had left at night, alone and on foot, to meet a smuggler who had been hired by her father to transport her to safety. Just 21 years old, Baahila embarked on a journey to freedom through Djibouti, Dubai, Brazil and Mexico – finally arriving at the U.S. border. She requested political asylum, believing she was only steps away from freedom and safety. Instead, she was shocked to be handcuffed and imprisoned while her asylum case is processed. This can take months to a year.

Baahila is frail-looking but has shown extraordinary courage. When she receives her hoped-for political asylum in the U.S., she plans to study, work hard and become a teacher.

The mission of Project Refuge is to facilitate a transition to social and financial independence for refugees from Somalia and East Africa who have suffered extreme violence, torture and persecution in their homelands; by providing safe, comfortable housing and centralized access to a network of supportive community services.

For further information visit www.projectrefuge.org

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