

Project Refuge

Client Profile: “Gefla” from Somalia

*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.*

Gefla is a 29 year old mother of two from Somalia. She recalls her childhood as generally peaceful and pleasant. Gefla’s parents divorced, and her mother re-married. She loved and respected her stepfather, who supported the family by building houses. Her mother was devoted to raising Gefla and a sister. She remembers her parents as “good people.” At age seven, Gefla was subjected to a crude and painful vaginal circumcision, a risky procedure that is commonly imposed on young girls in Somalia. Gefla’s case was especially brutal in that excessive bleeding required the man who performed the procedure to return a second time to “finish.” She continues to suffer repercussions—including heavy, painful periods, difficult childbirth and loss of sexual pleasure.

Despite this early trauma, life was basically peaceful prior to 1991. The family had enough to get by. Gefla attended some high school. She later married for 10 years, but divorced when her husband became verbally abusive toward herself and her mother. When the Somali government collapsed in 1991, war erupted across the country, and the brief periods of stability in Gefla’s life dissolved into chaos and violence.

Several years ago her beautiful sister was abducted at the market. A lengthy search proved fruitless. A few months later the sister reappeared, announcing that she had been forced to marry her abductor—and insisting that the family no longer search for her. The family has not seen her since, and they are heart-broken by the loss.

A few years later, as conditions in the country continued to deteriorate, armed intruders suddenly burst into the family home. A knife-wielding man grabbed Gefla and hit her head against the wall when she struggled. With the knife at her neck, he tore at her dress in an attempt to rape her. Gefla’s stepfather rushed to her aid and was promptly shot by the second intruder. Blood splattered everywhere. He died in front of Gefla and her children, amid the family’s hysterical screams. The knife-wielding man slashed Gefla’s throat—creating a wound that became infected and required surgery. Gefla was devastated by the violent loss of her beloved stepfather, the man who cared for her and gave his life trying to protect her. She said, “He was the only father I really knew, and we loved each other.” She bears a scar as a reminder. Gefla believes that her family was targeted because of their minority clan status. “We had no money, no protection, and we were scared all the time that the men would return,” she explained. Thus her mother urged Gefla to leave the country, for her personal safety and ultimate survival.

Gefla’s mother retrieved the bag of gold that she buried in the ground, and paid smugglers to arrange her daughter’s escape from the country. Gefla traveled for several months, via Kenya, Brazil, Columbia, Nicaragua and Mexico. She is thankful to God for watching over her, and grateful to friends and relatives who helped her along the way. Gefla’s mother agreed to take care of her children until they could be reunited. Now the whereabouts of the mother and both of Gefla’s children is unknown.

When Gefla arrived at the U.S. border and requested political asylum, she felt that her dream of freedom was about to be realized. She was shocked to find herself detained and imprisoned while her asylum case is pending. She has committed no crime. She remains hopeful that she will be permitted to build a new life in the U.S., and eventually be reunited with the children and mother that she misses so deeply. She said, in tears, “I beg God to keep them safe and re-unite us.”

Gefla is a warm, compassionate woman who is determined to overcome all obstacles and prevail. She has a strong work ethic and a thirst for knowledge. She plans to study, work hard and attain her goal of becoming a nurse, fulfilling a desire to care for others and provide for her family.

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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