

#MAIPIÙSPOSEBAMBINE INQUIRY
[NO MORE CHILD BRIDES]

I'M ONLY
A CHILD

*Stories of abuse and mistreatment
in the denied childhood of child brides*



Wanda Montanelli

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I'M Only A Child

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

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Child brides sold as objects, with a rite of marriage or a simple exchange of money, to people of adult age, suffer real abuse, an act which aids paedophilia. The stories told in this book are true, they took place in Africa, India, Yemen, Niger, Pakistan, Syria, Mexico; places where, due to poverty, war, famine, it becomes customary for parents to sell their daughters to adult suitors in exchange for money. The social denouncement aims of the #maipiùposebambine inquiry are empowered by the author's collaboration, through the Osservatorio Onerpo of which she is vice president, with the Girls Not Brides organisation, which, with a significant global partnership programme, plans to totally abolish forced marriage by 2030. Child brides sold as objects, with a rite of marriage or a simple exchange of money, to people of adult age, suffer real abuse, an act which aids paedophilia. The parties responsible are the families, which oblige their daughters to enter into forced marriages, and the men, who "buy" a child: as a wife-slave-sexual object. The stories told in this book are true, they took place in Africa, India, Yemen, Niger, Pakistan, Syria, Mexico; places where, due to poverty, war, famine, it becomes customary for parents to sell their daughters to adult suitors in exchange for money. The psychological and physical effects are devastating for girls torn from childhood and forced into marriage: from serious diseases like HIV, medical conditions caused by teenage pregnancies, psychiatric disorders, through to a high incidence of childbirth related deaths of both mother and baby. The social denouncement aims of the #maipiùposebambine inquiry uphold the belief that joint efforts to combat the phenomenon of child marriage will further the development of an awareness by all the stakeholders: family, schools, governmental institutions. To actively contribute towards solving this serious problem the author collaborates, through the Osservatorio Onerpo of which she is vice president, with the Girls Not Brides organisation, which, with a significant global partnership programme, plans to totally abolish forced marriage by 2030.

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Wanda Montanelli I'm Only a Child

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[No more child brides]

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A CHILD

(Stories of abuse and mistreatment

in the denied childhood of child brides)

Wanda Montanelli

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CHAPTER I STORIES ABOUT CHILD BRIDES

**To all the courageous little girls who started
the protest against child marriage,
and all the others who, although forced to marry,
are fighting for a better fate for their own children**

From dolls to husbands

These are true stories

They took place in countries where it is customary to oblige young girls to go from playing with dolls to being controlled by a husband, who is often elderly, a stranger, someone chosen by their family

The Tortured Child Bride A Symbol of Human Rights

Sahar Gul's story is emblematic and a testimony to unacceptable cruelty.

The image of the little girl who her torturers forced into prostitution is a picture of suffering: her swollen eyes, the bruised skin on her face, a burnt ear, her hands – without nails because the vile criminals pulled them off – are covered in dark scabs and wounds.

Everyone who's seen the photograph of the small victim has felt a surge of revulsion and rebellion. Civil society, the press, social networks, associations, have all made their strong disagreement and condemnation of the child's persecutor heard.

Sahar Gul refused to be a prostitute and she was massacred

The reason for all this fury was because the little girl refused to be a prostitute. As a little slave, forced into early marriage, she quickly realized there were no limits to the cruelty of her tyrant husband, the soldier Gulam Sakhi. The adult man who, in addition to having violated her innocence, felt he could make money out of her emaciated body, by selling her to his sickening peers.

He claimed powers of life or death over the child and helped by relatives – as cruel and greedy as himself – he made Sahar endure paid sexual encounters, with men of all ages, to make money and profit ruthlessly.

Sahar's and Gulam's is one of the many -too many- forced marriages, which when described truthfully, are nothing more than the actions of paedophiles against innocent little girls.

Right from the start, the intentions of the soldier's entire family unit were to earn money by offering his little wife to sate the appetites of perverts, ignoring the little girl's protests, her pain, her immense disgust.

An impossible life, then her escape and salvation

What happens in a house where adults hold a minor prisoner? And how does a twelve-year-old girl, caught in the trap, feel?

At first Sahar didn't realise the irreversibility of her state. They told her that getting married was a duty, a natural event, the only way to exist with dignity, with the man of the house responsible for the entire household. They told her this is what women have to do: get married, obey their husband and have children. They forced her to accept marriage, especially her parents, her mother. How she would have loved to have a sympathetic mother, one she could turn to for help in understanding what was happening to her, how all the other men who claimed her body fitted into the picture: old men, young men, strangers for whom she felt repulsion, who as they got closer to her made her heart seem about to burst from beating so fast, or just stop out of fear.

She hated them. And she hated her husband. She detested all the adults who portrayed marriage as a happy event to her. She found no confirmation of all their promises. She had thought, that although she was being forced to marry, she would find affection, loving gestures, comforting words, nice manners. But there was none of any of this. She was trapped and her husband was a tormentor; neither husband, nor friend, nor relation. A brute. Her mother-in-law and all the rest of the family were even worse than him. And Sahar was only a child.

Sahar didn't know who to turn to among the people who came and went in her home.

She showed signs of distress when she heard her relatives' unbelievable words as they insisted – every time a stranger crossed the threshold – in persuading her to whore. She refused, she screamed, she cried; but her husband and in-laws quickly went from words to more forceful methods: they used threats and any other means of coercion to break down the child's resistance.

It was impossible for Sahar to live with the fear, the sleepless nights, the dread of being insulted and offended every day. The awareness that there would never be either freedom or a future in her life, drove her to react.

One day she ran away and asked the neighbours for help: "They force me to have sex with other men! – she said – If you're Muslims you have to help me and tell the police what they're doing to me."

The neighbours immediately reported what was happening. The police intervened and summoned Gulam Sakhi who, saying he was sorry, promised to end the torture against Sahar. He asked the little girl to return home.

Unfortunately, the police – after giving Gulam a warning – sent Sahar back home, pretending they believed in the man's remorse and his words of repentance.

However, when dealing with an ogre, you have to take into account that it is unforgivably foolish to leave a child in his hands. In no story, be it true or a fairy tale, are ogres transformed into lambs by a simple recommendation from the authorities.

After returning home the nightmare just got worse for Sahar

In the little house, a cramped space in the district of Pol-e Khomri in Baghlan province, the worst period began, one of torture for Sahar who, beaten, chained up and left without food, was shut up in a basement. Wounded, insulted, in pain, she was left to the mercy of her relatives – who behaved like true criminals – until, many months later, one of her uncles went to visit her. The man realised that the child's face was swollen, her whole body covered in bruises, her eyes full of tears. He was astonished. He realised he was faced with inconceivable cruelty.

He immediately decided to report the matter to the police and go public about the disgrace.

He told as many people as possible, as well as the authorities, about the little girl's scandalous treatment, which was comparable to medieval torture; a violence so brutal as to reduce her to using a wheelchair for a long time when she was no longer able to walk.

The picture of the massacred little girl travelled all around the world. Thanks to the interest of the press, Sahar's swollen face, her black eyes, her wounded body, her unhappy gaze, were seen all over Afghanistan, and then through websites, blogs, social pages dealing with human rights, the case became an ultra-national disgrace, despite the authorities and the family trying to conceal the sinister and cruel affair.

A committee of inquiry set up by the President

Hamid Karzai, the president of Afghanistan, ordered a committee of inquiry to be set up, following which Sahar's ineffable husband and criminal relatives were prosecuted by law, with the immediate arrest of her relatives and an arrest warrant issued for Gulam Sakhi who went into hiding. However, the judgment was broadcast on Afghan national television and there were not many places where the man could hide. It was the month of May 2012. In July, Sahar's mother-in-law, father-in-law and sister-in-law were sentenced to ten years in prison for attempted murder.

But how could someone ever have absolute power over a child-wife?

Sahar's story began in May 2011, when she was only 12 years old, and was sold for five thousand dollars to her torturers, who immediately organised a forced marriage whereby they gained all legal power over the child.

The plan was to exploit her sexually and get paid handsomely by nonchalant paedophiles who, confident of her husband's consent, were not moved to pity by Sahar's tears or suffering gaze, and defiled her without any scruples whatsoever.

Sahar Gul's segregation in the home lasted until the day of her uncle's intervention, the police's subsequent action and President Karzai's decision, following the uproar on the pages of authoritative newspapers around the world.

The Times contributed to the dissemination very effectively in its Afghan publications, with articles entitled "Let's break the deathly silence on the status of women".

Newspapers, magazines, blogs, intensified the public debate until the parliamentary institutions approved a law making "domestic violence" a crime.

So there began in the country an acknowledgement and a process of civilisation of a part of society that still considers powers of life or death over wives to be legitimate, even if they are only little girls. But this is only an encouraging start because the outcome of the story leaves a bitter taste in the mouth.

Ten year prison sentences for the torturers which they don't serve

Although the case created an outcry in international public opinion, after Sahar's three torturers were sentenced to ten years in prison, the Court – during a further hearing in a half-empty courtroom – ordered the release of the three people responsible, in the absence of counterparties and the ministerial authorities.

The Court of Appeals subsequently condemned the torturers to five years, with the possibility for the victim to claim damages.

During the trial, Sahar took refuge with the Women for Afghan Women Association, the organisation which takes care of abused Afghan women, offering them legal protection and hospitality in specifically organised shelters.

On International Women's Day in 2012, an Internet café for women was opened in the Afghan capital, Kabul, in the name of Sahar Gul.

What with the acknowledgements of civil society and the feeling of having done the right thing Sahar realised there was a ray of light for her, even if unfortunately her disappointments were not over. She alternated between moments of hope and others of disappointment. She knew that unfortunately the process in the courts was not complete; she would gladly have done without further ordeals, interrogations, confrontations with those who had wronged her. She suffered in seeing her relatives again, and each time hoped it would be for last time. One day her bitterness was rekindled because a further ruling ordered the release of her torturers.

Sahar nevertheless decided to look to the future. With the help of new friends and the assistance -including psychological- of the association, the girl tried to leave the pain she will never forget behind her. She began to study, learning the first rudiments of education, starting from scratch. In fact, she was illiterate at the time of her marriage.

Now she wants to give a positive direction to her life. She dreams of engaging in politics to put actions and laws in place that prevent other women suffering as she suffered. She wants to give back the good and the help received. Instead she intends to forget the wickedness so that it's no longer part of her reality and her thoughts.

Maha, from dolls to a husband

“My father made me get married because he had heard about a rape and he was afraid it might happen to my sister and me as well. I didn't have a choice.”

This is what Maha says, a thirteen-year-old who got pregnant at a very young age. Her husband, Abdullah, is ten years older than her. Both are Syrian refugees fleeing the war, who found refuge in Jordan. Abdullah, young Maha's husband, also tries to explain the reasons for child marriages: "If we were still in Syria – he says – we wouldn't have got married, she's too young. But there were often rape attacks in the camp where we live and her father was afraid it might also happen to Maha".

In these places, every day you try and find protection from the bombs, and it's difficult to do so and survive, but no more difficult than trying to defend yourself from poverty and fear of violence.

These are the main reasons why a high number of parents force their daughters into child marriages.

In a quarter of the marriages registered in Jordan amongst the Syrian refugee population the bride is under eighteen, reports *Save the Children* that has collected data and testimonies by the baby brides in its dossier “Too young to marry”.

Child marriages were always fairly widespread in Syria before the war, when approximately 13% of brides were little more than children.

Then when war broke out the phenomenon increased exponentially. Nowadays in Jordan approximately 25% of Syrian brides are younger than 18, and in about half the cases the girls are forced to marry men at least ten years older than them.

The phenomenon is on the increase if you consider that in 2011 the marriages involving a baby-bride were 12% of all marriages. That number increased to 25% in 2013, and this tendency – that includes a quarter of the female population – has remained the same over the following years.

Maha and Abdullah, spouses against their will

“My future has been stolen from me – says Maha with a hint of sadness in her eyes – and my life is lost. This is not what I dreamt of for myself. I didn’t want to shut out every possibility of looking towards the future with the hope of being happy”.¹

What does happiness mean for Maha, if not being able to study, become emancipated and achieve financial independence?

Like her many girls, due to forced and child marriage, have to leave school, and stop dreaming of living in a better society, in a place where women’s rights, and the rights of people in general, are respected.

In the Zaatari refugee camp, in the semi-desert area of the largest camp that exists in the north of Jordan, 80 thousand refugees live in precarious conditions. Some live by the day hoping for government aid to survive and some, to give meaning and organisation to their lives, launch business ventures, small shops offering poor things or small craft enterprises.

In one of the thousands of tents in the camp we find Nadia, another child bride just 15 years old who, like Maha and many others, is aware she does not have a future:

"Ever since I was a child – says the girl – I dreamt of studying nutrition at university. I dreamt of a house and I planned to get married only after completing my education. Instead, my future has been stolen from me and my life is lost. Everything has been destroyed".²

It’s not always possible to come to the rescue of these young girls who would be so interested in growing, developing themselves and planning their own lives.

For some years now there have been numerous organisations that have implemented programmes to help children in war zones, or otherwise support young people living in rural areas where it is difficult to survive: Amnesty International, Unicef, Save the Children, Amref.

In 2011 the Elders – an international organisation of pacifists and human rights defenders – launched a global partnership against child marriages called *Girls Not Brides*, which currently includes more than a thousand associations that work for the common goal of abolishing child marriage by the year 2030.

This project is highly involving for anyone who feels committed to fighting for the rights of the weakest. The group I belong to has joined *Girls Not Brides* and is strongly motivated. So, the

¹ [Ilaria Sesana](#), *Le spose-bambine derubate del futuro [Child-brides deprived of their future]* – *Famiglia Cristiana*, 05/08/2014;

² *Ibidem*;

monitoring centre for the safeguarding of equal opportunities (Onerpo) chaired by Aura Nobolo, is among the organisations fighting for this principle of civilisation.

Working in partnership through social networks, we disseminate the group's aims and initiatives on the Facebook page "No more child brides" (*#maipiùsposebambine*).

Based on the network shares we immediately realised that there is considerable sensitivity on the part of men and women who, like us, hope for decisive action at all levels, both national and international, so the common project to abolish child marriage in every country in the world is fully achieved.

Child marriages in Mexico. The story of Itzel married at 14 years old

Itzel met Jesús when they were children. She liked him and fell in love with him at 14, when he was a handsome boy of seventeen, as happens to lots of girls, all over the world. But this was Mexico and adolescents often get married at a very early age. According to United Nations information 6.8 million Mexican citizens are married before age 18.

Itzel married Jesús, convinced by her family that this was the best thing to do for the good of them all. But the girl didn't know her choice would affect her for the rest of her life.

She left school and stayed at home to do the housework and look after the animals.

Her life was spent in loneliness, in a small house, with a little bit of countryside around it.

The days were monotonous and tiring, lived with little enthusiasm and no smiles; lots of duties, very few rights. But nobody could take away her right to dream: to imagine her life could be different, to remember how carefree she was before, when she could go out, go and see her friends, joke with them, go for walks, go to school.

Itzel remembered that at one time she had wanted to be more informed and educated, learn a profession and have a job; but now she was just a goat keeper.

As she ate her frugal meal alone, Itzel was sad and would have liked to tell all young girls: "Think very carefully before you get married. Above all, remember to study. I regret not having continued my education now and I wonder if life will ever give me another chance. I would so like to go back school".³

Not really fully understanding the problem of child marriage, Itzel experienced it first-hand and realised she had precluded any possibility of personal growth for herself. She therefore decided to follow the advice of a former classmate and turned to an association to obtain logistical support to get out of that situation. She was welcomed and helped so she was able to attend some training courses, regain her self-esteem and start to think of a better future.

The *Girls Not Brides* organisation, which is present in Mexico as everywhere else in the world, is very effective at supporting these lost girls who don't know who to turn to. Often in the villages, acquaintances and family members tend to convince the girls that theirs is an unavoidable fate, while in actual fact they are only adolescents or very young girls with their whole life ahead of them.

Without help they certainly couldn't do anything but submit to the wishes of their relatives, and this is why the associations' work is increasing significantly. The measures to assist these girls begin with a preventive action, aimed at preventing them from being forced to leave school to get married. This action is aimed at families, with meetings in the villages, where all the dangers that arise from child marriage are explained and described. Through documentaries, examples and direct testimonials the parents are made to understand that pregnancies at a very young age entail many

³ *Child marriages in Mexico. The story of Itzel married at 14, Onerpo; A day in the life of Itzel, a 15-year-old, [Girls Not Brides](#), 26 April 2017;*

dangers. The risks that girls face when they give birth to a child before age 18 are explained to them, ranging from spontaneous abortion, infant mortality, to serious health consequences during and after pregnancy.

The commitment of the activists of the humanitarian associations is constant, and is targeted at very poor families who live in rural areas of Mexico such as Chiapas, Guerrero and Veracruz, where without support they would have absolutely no chance to improve their condition and understand that 40% of the population married at an early age represents a human problem that weighs on the entire social economy.

Nujood, the courage to divorce at 10 years old

“I want a divorce.” This was the unpredictable declaration of a little girl who stood before the judge and expressed her intention to free herself from the noose of her marriage.

Nujood Ali, born in a small village in Yemen in 1998, is co-author of a book about her story translated into 17 languages, and is the youngest divorcee in the world.

Because of the family's poverty – when the girl was only nine years old – her father accepted a marriage proposal of a thirty-year-old. So Nujood Ali was forced to leave school to be a wife. She left her family and went to live with her groom.

She cleaned the house, spending her days between daily sexual violence alternated with beatings, which her husband didn't spare her even in the presence of his own mother, who, not only did not defend her, but supported the man's right to do what he wanted to the little girl's detriment.

Nujood Ali was only ten years old and only recently married when she decided she had had enough. She wanted to escape the harassment of a husband in his thirties who had taken away the disenchantment of being a child and made her fall into a kind of hell.

It was a woman in her family who helped her, giving her precious advice. Dowla, her father's second wife, who told her to run away and go in search of a law court.

So she ran away. Having reached a court she asked a magistrate to help her. A complaint was lodged and in the meantime Nujood Ali was housed in the home of another magistrate who then asked an association that fights child marriage to intervene.

The centre's activists, supported by a lawyer, started legal proceedings that would be an example to many other girls in the same conditions.

Nujood Ali went against her own family, who made her marry to obtain a modest dowry from her betrothed, and at the same time get rid of a mouth to feed at home.

The lawyer *Chadha Nasser*, who defended Nujood Ali free of charge, accused her husband of having broken the law by raping the little girl, and her father of having lied about his daughter's age.

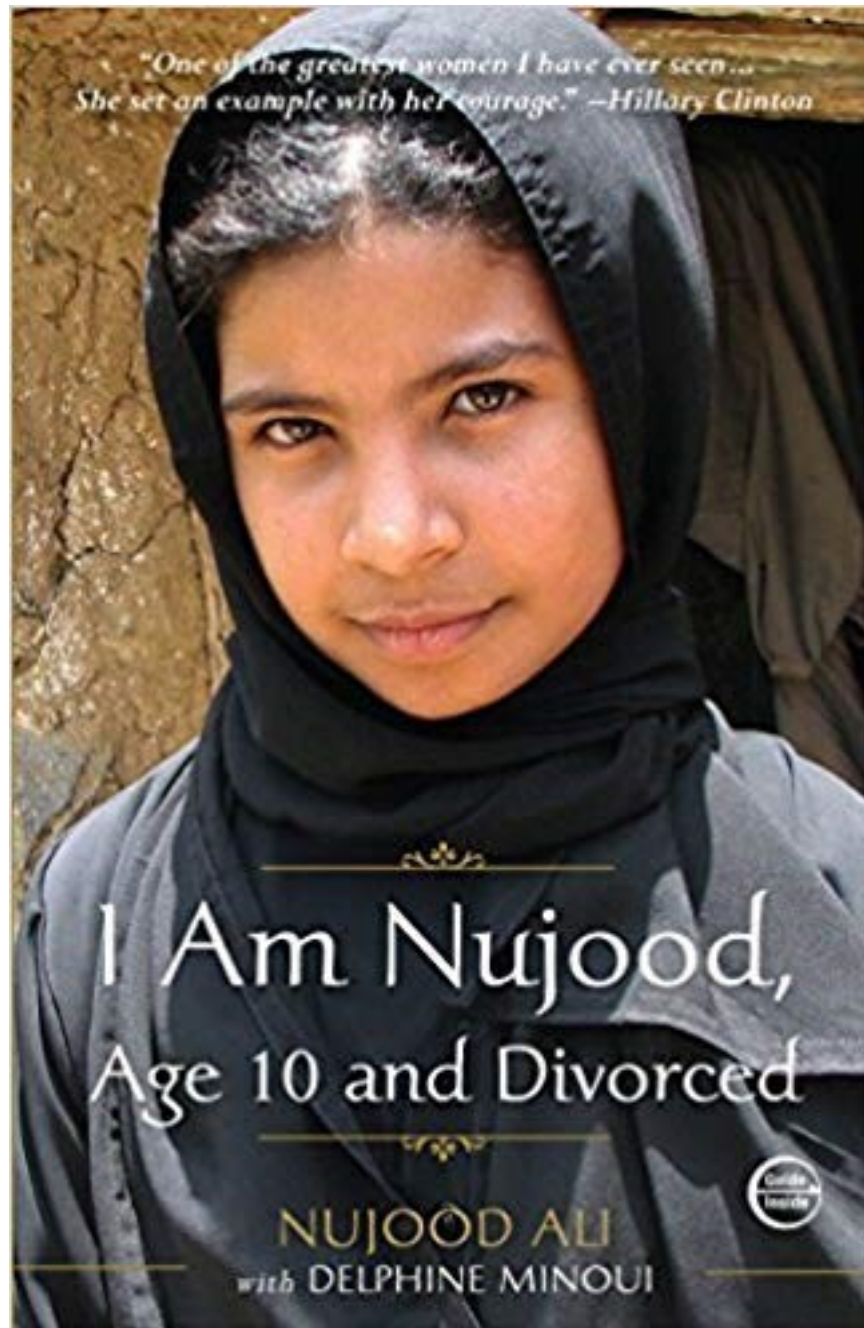
During the debate Nujood Ali refused the judge's proposal to return to her husband after an interval of five years. She couldn't stand that man, or his family, any more.

Nujood Ali got a divorce. It was the 15 April 2008. Her story is told in a book entitled “I am Nujood, age 10 and divorced” written by Nujood and the journalist Delphine Minoui.⁴

The book, distributed with huge success and translated into 17 languages, was made into a film by the director Khadija Al Salami, a victim herself – a former child bride – of an identical fate and a similar escape from a tyrant husband.

⁴ “I am Nujood, age 10 and divorced” by Nujood Ali and Delphine Minoui published on the 22 January 2009 by Michel Lafon;

Nujood Ali's story is personal and intensely narrated against the background of a rural environment in Yemen, similar to many other developing countries where the rights of girls and women are not recognised; where it seems that nobody pays any attention to the pain a little girl feels when, deprived of her childhood, her dreams, her plans for a happy life, she finds herself a prisoner of a man, in a house, a place, that all darken her very existence.



The book and the film on Nujood Ali are at the same time a warning and a journey of hope towards a better, freer, more humane and just society, without abuse and bullying at the expense of the weakest. A society open to total change to achieve the dream of many little girls: a society where everyone has rights. A society freed of poverty and the need to sell its own children.

Khadija, also a child bride, before she became a successful film director

Khadija Al-Salami, was born in 1966 in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen. At 11 years old she was forced to marry a man of thirty, but did not accept what she experienced as an abuse; and it was, despite her tribe and her family considering marriages between little girls and adults of even thirty or forty years older, legitimate and normal.

The child refused to have sex with her husband and he returned her to her family, as if she were damaged goods.

One day Khadija plucked up all her courage and decided to be the protagonist of her own life, to get divorced and choose to make herself a better person, possibly a happy one.

She ran away from her husband, went to an association for the protection of women, which helped her find work at a local TV station. It was the start of her recovery, her entrance into a work environment that she liked very much and that was to mark the course of her studies, her work and her success as a director.

A providential scholarship, won at 16, helped her achieve her objectives. She went to study in the United States and graduated with top marks in Film Production and Directing.

Then she went to live in France, where she began her career as a documentary filmmaker. She has made dozens of films on the role of Yemeni women and girls.

There have been many rewards in recognition of her commitment in defence of child brides. She was nominated as a *Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters* by Frédéric Mitterrand, Minister of Culture and Communication at that time. She has received accolades from many institutions including the *Foreign Legion*.

Her film "I am Nujood, age 10 and divorced" won an award at the International Film Festival in Dubai in 2014.

Khadija Al-Salami, is the first female Yemeni film director and stands for the commitment and courage of the women of her country. She is an example for all the girls who do not wish to submit to cruel, old fashioned, rural customs which out of ignorance trample their basic rights to live in freedom without being abused.

Malala Yousafzai, the Nobel Prize girl

Malala is convinced that girls are entitled to an education. She was ten years old when the Swat valley, the District of Pakistan where she lived, was attacked by the Taliban that abolished the right to study with the closure of many schools, including her own.

Malala described life under Taliban rule in a BBC blog using the pseudonym Gul Makai. It was 1999. The girl began several collaborations with major newspapers, including the "New York Times", where she expressed her disagreement with Taliban rule, opposed to education for all Pakistani citizens, especially women.

She on the contrary loudly affirmed during interviews: "I want to go to school, I want to play, listen to music, sing!".

In 2012, she became a Taliban target.

"Which one of you is Malala Yousafzai?" was the question she heard, but didn't have time to answer before two gun shots hit her head. Two armed men had boarded the school bus that was taking her home, with the intention of killing her for having written in her Urdu blog that women have a right to education.

Malala's topics were considered obscene by the terrorists who claimed responsibility for the attack with these phrases: "This is a new chapter of obscenity which we must put an end to... she

has become a symbol of western culture in the area, which she has openly touted... she considers Obama her ideal leader. Let this be a lesson to her".⁵

In the telephone claim to responsibility for the attack, Ehsanulla, the Taliban spokesman, threatened a new ambush if Malala survived.

Malala indeed hovered between life and death, but she managed to survive. She was transferred to a hospital in Great Britain and recovered. She then decided to remain in the U.K. with her family, to continue her studies and devote herself to her campaign for girls education.

She's tough. She was brought up with a good education at home. Her father *Ziauddin*, a poet, and a teacher at the *Khushal Public School*, is of a progressive and emancipated mentality. He has always taught her the value of education ever since she was little and has shown a desire, on several occasions, to see his daughter go into politics one day.

The confidence Malala's father had in his daughter's talent encouraged the girl to engage in social activities which she divulged through blogs and the net. So she began to receive awards and new assignments.

She won the *National Youth Peace Prize*, conferred on her by the Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani and was subsequently nominated for *the International Children Peace Prize*.

On 12 July 2013, on the occasion of her 16th birthday, she wore a shawl that had once belonged to Benazir Bhutto, to speak at the Headquarters of the United Nations in New York and made an appeal for the right of every boy and every girl to education.

In November 2013 Malala was awarded the *European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought*.

President Martin Schulz defined her as 'a global icon of the fight for girls' education'.

Moved, Malala said: "I hope that through our unity and our determination we can achieve our goals and help the 57 million children who expect something from us, who do not want an iPhone, xbox, PlayStation or chocolate, but just want a book and a pen."

Malala's growth programme was set to achieve its highest levels, when beaming, in 2014, she announced on Twitter that she had been admitted to Oxford University: "I'm very excited," she wrote. She was happy to achieve her dream of being able to study. On her website *www.malala.org*, through a non-profit organisation, she collects funds for educational programmes throughout the world.

On 10 October 2014 Malala was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize together with the Indian activist Kailash Satyarthi. She was seventeen years old and the youngest winner of a Nobel Prize *for the struggle against the suppression of children and young people and for the right of all children to education*.

The story of Aberash. The courage to change

Aberash was 14-years-old, a teenager, when she was kidnapped by a 29-year-old farmer who took her to a hut and brutally raped her.

The man's intention was to force her into marriage. He hoped to get her pregnant and make use of the rule derived from *telefa*, which according to ancient tradition makes kidnapping socially acceptable when the misdeed is followed by a wedding to put things right.

⁵ *Who is Malala Yousafzai? Nobel Peace Prize 2014, Public Sphere, 10 October 2014;*

The girl, however, had no intention of yielding to such an imposition, nor to overcoming the affront she had suffered.

She was left alone in the hut and when her kidnapper left, promising to return soon, she realised there was a gun in the house. It belonged to her tormentor who used to hang it on a hook. Aberash, who hated that prison, took the gun and fled.

Her kidnapper returned home and realised that the girl was not there, so he looked for her with some of his friends. He found her and tried to grab her, but she wriggled free, then she fired the gun and killed him.

The story took place in 1996, in Ethiopia, in a rural area, many hours journey away from the capital Addis Ababa.

Aberash was accused of murder. She had the entire village against her, including the kidnapper's mother who found it natural to abduct a girl to then marry her. "It's something everybody does – she said – because it's part of our tradition".

The trial ended two years later with an acquittal for legitimate defence, and the case of Aberash gave rise in Ethiopia, to a provision which considers anyone who kidnaps a woman, for the purpose of forcing her to accept a remedial marriage, as an outlaw; even more so if the case involves a child.

This was a legal breakthrough of utmost importance in a society that has always considered the kidnapping of adolescents and subsequent forced marriage permissible.

The role of the lawyer *Meaza Ashenafi* was decisive for the success of the trial. The legal defence and help of the association of women lawyers (*Andinet Women Lawyers Association*) – founded by Ashenafi herself – obtained an effective result that symbolised the redemption of the wrongs suffered by Aberash, and was a warning for those who mistakenly believed they could use violence against girls with impunity.

Once she had released Aberash, Meaza Ashenafi entrusted her to the association she co-founded, for a journey of assistance to overcome the pain still alive in her heart.

However, the girl had to leave home, her family and go to Addis Ababa to be far away from the accusations of the inhabitants of her village.

It was too risky to remain in a place where her kidnapper's father demanded that Aberash be killed and buried next to his son.

The new criminal code and an acquittal do not serve to make it clear to the tribal society in which the unfortunate fact happened that the inalienable rights of women and girls do exist: self-determination, the right to study, to choose their own destiny. Democratic principles which Aberash's father, the village teacher, and a few others, argued with drawn swords in defence of the girl. Two men as allies in a patriarchal society may be just enough to hope for a better future, and Aberash trusts in the support of those who understand her, to dream of a change in her life and in the lives of the other girls who live in her country.

Meaza Ashenafi: the fight for women's rights

Ms. Ashenafi, the lawyer responsible for Aberash's acquittal, has campaigned for many years for legal reform on public education and information for the rights of women and girls.

Born in 1964 in Ethiopia, in a rural village 800 km from Addis Ababa, she was brought up by her father – the mayor of his town – with firm educational principles and a schooling plan for her, her brothers and her sisters.

Meaza soon realised that she wanted to study law. At 17 she was admitted to the University of Addis Ababa, and was the only girl in a class of fifty men, just as in 1986, she was the only woman who graduated in law at her university.

Meaza Ashenafi is currently involved in the work of the *African Centre for Gender at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa*, and in the creation of the African Women's Rights Observatory.

And in November 2018 her appointment was announced as head of the Supreme Court, the highest legal institution in the country. The Ethiopian Parliament unanimously approved her candidacy.

After the recent historical election of Zewde Sahle-Work to the presidency, the country in the Horn of Africa chose a woman for the first time for such a prestigious role.

Ethiopia is changing, including under the pressure of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed who gave impetus to his country's reform programme by deciding that 50% of the executive of Addis Ababa should be composed of women.

A fine example for all African countries which can consider the patriarchal model of marginalisation of women in political and institutional roles outdated.

Difret, the courage to change

Aberash's story inspired the film "Difret, the courage to change", in which the little girl is called Hirut Assefa. The film's narrative is inspired by the true story of Aberash Bekele.

Produced by Angelina Jolie and directed by Zeresenay Berhane Mehari, the film was presented in the United States, where a petition of 135 thousand signatures was delivered to Catherine M. Russell, US Ambassador for global women's issues, by the international organisation *Girls Not Brides*, which interacts in various fields on the problem of child marriages.

In the summer of 2018, from the 25 to 27 June in Malaysia, *Girls Not Brides* convened the largest gathering of civil society supporters committed to putting an end to child marriage.

The organisation's common goal is to allow all girls, all over the world, to realize their potential. To feel free to choose what is best for their life: to study, to gain professional experience, to grow up believing in themselves.

A film to let the world know about the strenuous fight against child marriages

Difret, the courage to change is considered a commendable film. Below is the online review published on "Game Surf ":

"Women's emancipation is a topic that cinema has begun treating in an increasingly disruptive way – writes Roberto Vicario listing various western films on this subject – *Difret, the Courage to Change*, however focuses on what is, perhaps, an even more dramatic topic when compared to the emancipation that western women fight for, and that is the total annihilation of any human right, tied to outdated, ancestral rites that many towns and villages in Africa (but not only!) still use today.

To be able to portray the status of women with a clear eye and strong critical sense, the director Zeresenay Berhane Mehari – resident in the US, but born in Ethiopia – leads us, through the eyes of the camera, to live a true story that really happened in his country of origin “:

The choice of the film's title is in itself an exhortation to look with optimism to the future, in fact in Ethiopian the name Difret means courage, and the film is meant to be an encouragement to fight together to change things.

"*Difret – The Courage to Change* – emphasises Roberto Vicario – is a film that, we are sure, will be uncomfortable for many, especially in its country of origin and in other countries that use similar practices. A film conceived many years ago, which experienced various production problems, almost to its permanent cancellation.

It was Angelina Jolie who, being increasingly active herself in the social field, revived the fortunes of this project and fascinated by the story and the subject decided to take part as co-producer. A happy choice not only for the significance and value of the film – capable even of winning the Sundance Festival – but mainly because from possible cancellation we progressed to a media attention, which can only be beneficial to the production. On the other hand, as the film's title says, we must never stop fighting, but fight with courage to defend our rights, but more than anything else our dreams."⁶

A petition film

The success of "*Difret the courage to change*", the film produced in the US with a strong emotional and cultural impact, has not just happened overnight but is the result of many initiatives that preceded and followed the distribution of the work throughout the world. These include the essential initiative of the 1 October 2015, when *Girls Not Brides* launched #mylifeat15, an international campaign calling on governments to make it a primary goal to put an end to child marriage by 2030.

Girls Not Brides, global meeting 2018



We celebrated reaching 1000 members with a Group photo at our Global Meeting. Photo credit: Graham Crouch/Girls Not Brides

In Kuala Lumpur, during the second *Girls Not Brides* global meeting, about a thousand organisations from over 70 countries gathered to discuss the issue of child marriage.

⁶ Roberto Vicario, Review of "*Difret, the Courage to Change*", *Women's emancipation, told with courage!* Game Surf, 21 January 2015;

The event was overwhelming and participation strongly felt. The interventions, which focussed on achieving the goal of abolishing child marriage by 2030, developed future theories of commitment planning to work collectively at local, national, regional and global levels.

Given the encouraging results already obtained, the effective words of Lakshmi Sundaram, executive director of *Girls Not Brides*, opened up hopes of possible short and long term achievements of goals even more. Her report, published on the *Girls Not Brides* portal, highlighted the significant commitment on the part of all the partnership's organisations:

"Members – wrote Lakshmi – have been able to effectively share learning, conduct joint advocacy, change local attitudes, influence national and regional strategies, leverage new resources, hold governments accountable and build South-South collaboration. However, for partnerships to thrive and have the greatest impact, they need to include a diversity of voices and be managed effectively".

Young people are key change-makers.

"During the global meeting – Lakshmi specified – youth activists shared examples of how their work has led to concrete changes in the lives of girls. It was clear that if we want to end child marriage, we have to empower youth and youth-led organisations and ensure they have the agency to make decisions about their present and future". And it is precisely the commitment of girls who have suffered and experienced child marriage that is one of the drivers of the global project, because, according to Lakshmi Sundaram, they "are amongst the most powerful advocates in efforts to end child marriage, but they need appropriate support to share their stories safely and effectively. They must also be involved in designing policies and programmes to address the issue.

This is why it's critical that the global movement to end child marriage *Girls Not Brides* doesn't just focus on prevention – we have to address the needs of married girls in a holistic manner. To this end we must address gender inequality – stated Lakshmi – it must be at the heart of everything we do, since such discrimination is the fundamental cause of child marriage. And it is important to involve men and boys who can be a key part of the solution to the problem. (...) However, we need to have the courage to discuss some of these difficult topics – including sexuality, social norms and power and race dynamics – openly and respectfully. We're not going to make progress on ending child marriage if we're not willing to take these conversations beyond the Global Meeting".⁷

Memory Banda: I'll marry when I want

Memory's story is called "*A warrior's cry against child marriage*".

I'll tell it to you because it's very engaging and also fun to listen to. The video is posted on YouTube (with translations into 38 languages). Just enter the name Memory Banda into the search engine to find it.

I write "fun" because this girl really is a force of nature. She is able to describe with firmness, a sense of humour and courage the enormous problem of a marriage which they wanted to make her accept at all costs.

Her story takes place in Malawi, a country in East Africa. Read what the girl says:

"When I was 13 years old, I was told: 'You are grown up, you have now reached the age when you're supposed to go to the initiation camp'. I was like: 'What? I'm not going to go to the initiation camp'.

⁷ Lakshmi Sundaram, *Ten takeaways from the Girls Not Brides Global Meeting – 11 July 2018;*

You know what the women said to me? 'You are a stupid girl. Stubborn. You do not respect the traditions of our society, of our community'. (...)"

This teenager's positive energy is exceptional, for not only did she manage to avoid her own marriage, but she fought to have laws passed, to interest public opinion and the institutions of her country. She's organised sit-ins with her friends to get in touch with the relevant authorities to deal with the unfortunate problem of child brides.

Memory tells her story directly to a meeting:

This is her public speech:

"I'll begin today by sharing a poem written by my friend from Malawi, Eileen Piri. Eileen is only 13 years old, but when we were going through the collection of poetry that we wrote, I found her poem so interesting, so motivating. So I'll read it to you. She entitled her poem

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