

COURAGE

Survivors of child marriage
share their stories



Equality Now & Goga Khatiashvili

This publication tells the stories of seven women, victims of violence, who were forced to marry as children. Some were able to escape before marriage, and all have now gained their freedom. It is dedicated to everyone who decides to speak up about violence.

By sharing these stories, we hope to remind people that girls and women have the right to live free from violence.

If you are facing violence, you are not alone. Turn to the back page for details of support available in Georgia.

Contents

- 4 Acknowledgments
- 5 Foreword
- 6 Introduction
- 8 Tami's story
- 15 Amaryllis' story
- 20 Narilatha's story
- 31 Camelia's story
- 34 Calathea's story
- 40 Kesane's story
- 43 Chinara's story
- 47 Goga Khatiasvili
- 51 Organizations providing legal support to survivors
- 52 Getting support in Georgia

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We are extremely grateful to all the women and girls who have opened up about their lives and shared their emotions with the public. We thank and honor these courageous women by listening to their experience and working to do all that we can to ensure no woman or girl has to suffer the same cruel treatment.

The names mentioned in the book have been changed, except for Tamam (Tami) Abulova and Chinara Kojaeva, who decided to openly share their stories.

Design: Pete's Studio

Foreword

The women who have so generously and bravely detailed their abuse here have not generally been seen as individuals with aspirations or desires of their own. Or rather such aspirations or desires are deemed irrelevant in a society that has assigned strict gendered roles to them and under which they are disempowered and violated with considerable impunity. Through these stories, we can see clearly repeated and compounded patterns of abuse: early and forced marriage, loss of education, sexual and domestic violence, acute dependency, and severely limited options.

These stories are quite exceptional. The young women found the support that allowed them to escape the men who were abusing them and to find safety. That support came occasionally from family members, but often from law enforcement and sometimes from teachers and community members. Most also found safety in shelters for women who have experienced abuse, providing a space for them to heal and start building a better future.

These survivors then have shown us the way forward:

- start early in schools and in our communities educating our children (our future communities) about equality for all people
- train teachers, medical professionals, and social workers to recognize, address and report any discrimination or abuse
- improve legal frameworks and develop strong implementation mechanisms to protect women and girls from abuse – including in relation to early and forced marriage, sexual violence, domestic violence (including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence and neglect)
- train law enforcement, judiciary, and lawyers to take survivors seriously and work sensitively with them to get justice
- make sure there are prevention and support systems in place, including properly funded shelters, to assist women and children survivors of sexual and domestic abuse.

Jacqui Hunt, Equality Now



Introduction

Child marriage happens on every continent except Antarctica, across cultures and religions. According to UNFPA, one in every five girls around the world is married, or in a union, before the age of 18. Wherever it happens, child marriage is a violation of the girl's rights.

Child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and patriarchal values. In the belief that girls and boys are not of equal worth. In the belief that the girl child is the property of her father until he can find a suitable husband for her. In the belief that girls and women belong in the home, taking care of and bearing children.

After entering into marriage, many girls and women become financially dependent on their husbands. This leaves them vulnerable to domestic violence.

Though Georgian legislation prohibits the official registration of a marriage of persons under the age of 18, girls are still being married as children. These marriages instead begin with cohabitation, which ultimately constitutes an unregistered union of individuals.

Every year, I hear about a hundred cases concerning crimes related to child marriage. Legal proceedings do not leave space for the full story. There is no space for these girls and women to speak about their childhoods, their emotions, what they wanted from their lives, and what was decided for them. The legal system deals in facts and their stories are lost. This publication is a platform for these stories to be told.

The publication tells the stories of women of different generations, who have experienced violence and abuse and who found a way out. They decided to open up to share their life stories, as they no longer wanted to be invisible. Sharing these stories, and speaking out against family members, relatives, and the community takes a great deal of strength and enormous courage.

While working on this publication I spent several days in a shelter for victims of violence. The women there have faced violence I cannot contemplate, yet they never give up one thing - hope and faith in the future.

By sharing these stories, I want to reach out to girls across Georgia who might be facing child marriage to let them know they are not alone and that they have rights. Child marriage is against the law, and there are people with a responsibility to protect them.

Goga Khatiashvili



Tami's story

Tamam (Tami) was born in Russia in 2003.

She was three months old when her parents brought her to Georgia to live with her grandparents and returned to Russia. The girl lived with her grandparents until the age of four when she was sent to Russia to live with her parents again.

Tami found it very difficult to live far away from her grandparents, as they, and not her parents, were the closest people she had. When she was seven, the family returned to Georgia once again and settled down in Dmanisi, a city in the Kvemo Kartli region.

Tami learned the Georgian language very well. She believes that if you live in Georgia, you must speak the national language fluently. Since her childhood, Tami has always dreamt of studying. Unlike what is expected from many of her peers, she looked forward to the day when she would go to university and find a job.

While her parents encouraged her to study, they still limited many of her choices and actions. She lacked the most fundamental human value - independence and freedom.

"A girl cannot go out alone, unaccompanied by her parents. Why not? Why can't she do that?", Tami would often ask herself.

"She [the girl] is also a human being; she does have the right to go out, doesn't she? But I did not have that right."

"I was not allowed to go on outings. I would see my friends and classmates getting ready for excursions, rejoicing about hiking plans, and I already knew what my father would say. I knew he would never let me go. It's a pity, as I could have visited many sites and seen remarkable places in Georgia."

"It was not the money that bothered my parents, no, they just wouldn't let me go. My brother could go on excursions whenever he wished - he was allowed to go, but why? Because he was a boy! Being a girl, I had no rights. I would always

get furious about it - why can't I do all those things that my brother does? We are from the same family, right? We have the same parents, don't we?"

All this had a dramatic effect on Tami's emotional state.

Tami was not allowed to use social media. She didn't have a mobile phone – girls are not permitted to own one. This is a common practice in her community, depriving women and girls of the possibility to socialize. She had never protested against these restrictions as she knew it would be to no avail.

Tami would often ask herself and her mom why her parents did not trust her. She was deeply worried about the lack of trust she felt from her parents. She can recall her dad's words, he was constantly saying that raising a girl was a difficult task.

Despite the restrictions, Tami still managed to participate in competitions and achieve good results. Once, she even won an artistic reading competition but the award ceremony was held in another city, so her parents didn't let her go. As her father never let her go anywhere, Tami feared he would do the same and prohibit her from applying to university and start living by herself.

Tami was well aware of her dad's attitude towards girls. He would always say that a woman must get married and her husband should take care of her. The restrictions and prohibitions, tightening like a knot around her neck, were suffocating Tami, yet she could not afford to give up and tried her best to achieve even more success.

Tami believes that the above attitude of parents towards their children restricts the rights of girls and women. In her community, girls of 16-17 of age are considered immature and it's assumed they cannot think for themselves. Parents believe whatever decisions they make for their children are always right. Most families never listen to their children's opinions – *"What will the village say? What will people say?"* This is the main concern for many families.

Tami had always dreamt of becoming a journalist but had never dared to say it aloud. Her mother kept telling her to choose a profession that her future husband would be



happy about and let her work, preferably one where she has to work in an office and would hardly ever communicate with her male co-workers.

Tami's mom often asked Tami to look after her brothers or cook meals – “*Tami, wash the dishes; Tami, cook the dinner; Tami, clean the house.*” She would obey her mother's instructions, only objecting if the chores got in the way of her homework.

The minute the talks about a potential marriage began, Tami's mother started to try to keep Tami away from her books. Whenever Tami was doing homework, her mom would deliberately tell her to run some errands. When Tami once again refused to get married, her father threatened to throw her books away and forbid her from reading.

Tami had never received support from her parents. She did not get along with her mom, and only on rare occasions would the two sit and talk.

“*Being a woman does not mean just getting married and having children,*” says Tami, who believes that a good woman is an accomplished woman, who is capable of living independently. She thinks a woman should be a role model for her children. Tami's mother had never been an example to her daughter, and Tami is sure she will never treat her children the way her mother treated her.

Tami had always feared her father. If she wanted to go somewhere, she would never ask her dad directly, she could not dare to do so. She would often turn to her grandmother for help. Tami found that she had a lot in common with her grandma. Tami was much closer to her grandparents rather than her parents - and could always rely on their support.

Despite her parents' attitude, Tami could have never imagined that she would face the problem of marriage at an early age. While diligently driving the girl's admirers away, Tami's father kept saying that his daughter was not yet ready to start a family. This continued until the girl turned 16.

Having celebrated her 16th birthday, the number of potential “suitors” increased, and Tami's parents began talking about marrying off their daughter. But her parents had already chosen a fiancé for her - it was the son of a friend of Tami's father, who she knew quite well. As a child, Tami had heard the boy's father always wishing to welcome her to his family as a daughter-in-law, whereas Tami's father was hesitating,

saying that it was too early for his daughter to wed. “*The time will come, my daughter is not fit for the marriage yet*” -

The marriage age for a boy arrives when he wishes so, because he is a boy. For a girl it is when her parents decide it is the right time.

The age of 16 was chosen as the appropriate age for the marriage. Certainly, the pre-established rule was strictly adhered to in this particular case - the decision was made by Tami's parents. Even relatives had already started advising the girl to get engaged.

Tami's immediate plans however did not include an early marriage. She had never even considered having a family at the age of 16. It was other people who had decided and planned her life, forcibly imposing it on her.

Only to her mom could she dare say “no.” “*Marrying me off at this age is a disaster,*” Tami would say, explaining to her mom that she did not love the boy she was being compelled to marry. Her mother kept saying that she would get used to it and fall in love with the boy once they started living together. but Tami would reply that it would not be love, but coercion.

The parents had never abused Tami physically, yet the psychological pressure was intense.

One day, her mom returned from work early. Tami immediately knew what was coming. She told Tami that their relatives and the boy's family members were coming over to visit them.

Tami asked her mom to phone the boy's relatives and tell them not to come over, but she ignored her begging. The guests arrived that evening.

One by one the relatives entered Tami's room to learn about the girl's wishes. Having understood that it was useless asking Tami, they started threatening her. Her mom tried to convince her that if she kept refusing to marry, her father would not let her go to university. Hearing this was extremely frightening, but she still kept resisting, telling her mom that she did not want to get married yet. Tami even promised her mom that if the fiancé could wait several years, she would seriously think about the proposal. The parents accepted this as her consent.

The excited guests and relatives turned on music and started having fun. It was the longest day, Tami felt it would never end. Sitting in her room, Tami could hear the music playing and guests rejoicing, she was willing the engagement party to be over.

The following day, the boy's parents showed up, bringing presents and sweets for the family. Her dad picked up Tami early from school so that she could meet the guests.

From that day on, everyone in the village was talking about Tami getting married. For villagers, the engagement was tantamount to marriage, the engaged woman is already considered the spouse and property of the man. A few months later, Tami's grandmother died. This hit Tami hard. Tami changed and started to feel more lonesome. She would hardly eat or talk – and was always in a bad mood. Her grandmother was very loving and the person Tami trusted the most. Her death left Tami devastated.

Following the death of her grandmother, the fuss around the marriage temporarily subsided. Seeing the grief Tami was experiencing, her father promised not to push her into the marriage without her consent. This turned out to be just temporary. Less than a week had passed after the promise when her family resumed the talks about her marriage. The pressure became more and more intense. The parents believed that a girl at the age of 16 was ready to start a family. Perhaps, they even feared their daughter could be kidnapped for marriage. Despite bride-kidnapping being against the law in Georgia, it sometimes still took place and particularly in their region.

Following this, things got worse for the girl. Gradually, a sense of estrangement started to develop between her and her family members. *“Only God knows what I was going through. I cried every day, I was feeling depressed every day, and I didn't know what to do. The only thing I really wanted was to leave home for good. I had even lost my grandmother and I no longer had the most precious person in the house with whom I was feeling happy.”* These were the thoughts torturing Tami and motivating her to find another way.

One day, before leaving for school, Tami accidentally caught a glimpse of a text message on her mother's mobile phone from the boy's family members saying in a few days they were going to bring over the engagement ring. Tami's mom had agreed, replying to ask which color the bridegroom preferred most of all so that she could make her daughter wear that color dress.

Tami realized she had only one week to act.

She texted the boy that she did not want to marry him and asked him not to come over. The boy did not reply to Tami, though he showed Tami's message to his parents. They told Tami's mother.

That evening, Tami was in her room doing homework when she suddenly heard her mom yell. Shouting at her, she demanded Tami explain how she had dared send a message to her fiancé. The same evening, her father started menacing her, threatening to kill her.

“We gave our promise to these people and you have to marry him by all means! We can't disgrace our family in the village because we have already given our word to the family!” - said her father, who sounded more insistent than ever before.

Finally, it dawned on Tami that her family cared more about their family's reputation rather than the well-being of their daughter. She felt helpless and lonely. She could vividly see how she was losing everyone and everything. She could see how she was going back to the past. She realized that her desires were so insignificant that no one cared about them, just the family reputation, and nothing else mattered.

She understood that for the sake of the family's honor, she had to sacrifice her personal interests and marry the man whose mere presence made her feel repulsed and uneasy.

While her dad was yelling at her, she temporarily switched off from the outer world. Unable to utter a sound, Tami was just sitting and shivering. The only thing she wanted was for her father to cease shouting and let her go back to her room.

“I was not to be blamed. The only thing I did was to refuse to marry – nothing more,” these were Tami's thoughts while receiving the reproaches and orders from her father. At that moment, she wished to have been born as a boy, who, generally speaking, rarely became the center of parents' fury.

Each family greeting a baby girl was unfortunate, Tami's father firmly believed. *“A family that has no daughter is happy”* - Tami would often hear him say.

Tami decided to make a move. She understood that the only way to escape the torture was to flee. Tami turned to her teacher and acquaintances for help, who informed law enforcement.

And this is where the police stepped in. An investigation was launched under the article of coercion to marriage. Tami told everything to the police, after which she was transferred to a shelter with her consent.

The rumors about Tami's decision soon spread across the village. While many approved of the girl's action, some said the girl left her family, not for her studies but to lead a fun and carefree life.

Thanks to her unparalleled courage, Tami survived the battle and maintained her freedom and dignity. She demonstrated to the public that she does not belong to anybody.

Tami is now getting used to living independently. She does not regret her decision and plans to master her professional skills so that she can become a journalist, as she had always wanted. She is going to get married whenever she feels ready and willing to do so. She wishes to visit different villages and talk to people about how she managed to escape an unwanted marriage.

She urges all women to speak up and fight. "If they remain silent, no one will ever know about their stories," says Tami addressing her peers to raise their voices and fight for their happiness.

Amaryllis' story

"I come from a small family," says Amaryllis, and begins her story by describing her family. Her parents got married in their adult years and believed that giving proper education to their children was vital, so both Amaryllis and her younger brother were raised with a considerable amount of attention on their studies.

A love of learning was instilled in Amaryllis from an early age and she was told that getting a decent education was important. Her parents never discriminated against their children and took equal care of Amaryllis and her brother.

"I had an active lifestyle," says Amaryllis, who was considered one of the most successful students in her school. Her teachers tried to support the girl by engaging her in various projects or training. The parents always inspired Amaryllis to take part in the activities necessary for her development.

Amaryllis had often heard that in her region, which covers the southeastern part of Georgia, underage girls were forced to get married, mostly against their will. However, in recent years, she noticed girls and their families were more and more focused on receiving education, which was gradually becoming the number one priority for them.

Despite this, her mother would still discuss the possibility of Amaryllis starting a family at a young age. Her father would intervene in these conversations, encouraging his wife to reconsider the matter of marrying off their daughter. Her parents often argued about this, ultimately coming to a mutual agreement that providing their daughter with a good education was their top priority.

At the age of 13, when Amaryllis was in the eighth grade, potential "suitors" started to appear, they would visit her family to negotiate. *"I cannot decide for my daughter, she must first study and receive a degree"* - was



the response her father would pronounce in a slightly angry but diplomatic tone to the insistent relatives of young men who would show up at his house in an attempt to make an offer of marriage. When rumors spread across the village about the firm position and stern character of the girl's father, suitors felt reluctant to visit their house, yet they continued to pressure the child's mother.

Amaryllis was 17 when she met a 21-year-old man living in the same district. He liked her at once, though she told him that studying and getting an education was most important for her, so she was not interested in starting a serious relationship. After meeting him several times, Amaryllis told the young man that she no longer wanted to continue seeing or communicating with him as she was determined to devote all her time to her studies. The boy did not listen to her.

He kept on sending text messages and phoning her, but Amaryllis did not respond. One day, he sent her several text messages threatening that if she refused to marry him, he would kidnap her and forbid her to continue with her studies. On reading this, Amaryllis was terrified and blocked his phone numbers. She never imagined that his threats would soon become a harsh reality.

In early 2020, on her way to a tutorial, Amaryllis noticed the young man hanging around with his male friends near his car. Startled at the sight of them, she slowed down. Upon hearing the sound of the car engine start, sensing the imminent threat, she rushed towards the entrance of the building. Once she got inside the building, he phoned her to tell her that he only wanted to talk with her and had never intended to harm her.

"Leave me alone, I won't come downstairs" - she answered and went to her tutoring session.

When she was leaving the teacher's apartment, suddenly the man appeared out of nowhere and stood in front of her. He signaled to his friends to drive towards him. The car stopped directly opposite her, blocking her from entering the building again.

Within seconds, Amaryllis was trapped in the hands of three men. She started screaming and tried to fight them off, though the men's hands were holding her body tightly. One of them seized her from behind so that she could not move. The two others grabbed her legs and all three together threw her into the back of the car like a sack of potatoes.

A friend of Amaryllis and their teacher, who had heard the girl scream, were desperately trying to help her. They tried to pull the kidnappers away from the girl, but they weren't strong enough. They weren't able to stop the men from driving away with Amaryllis.

Amaryllis was disoriented for a few minutes but did not lose consciousness. Soon it dawned on her that the men had put her like a newly purchased item on the car seat and excited with the purchase, drove away crazily.

The kidnapped girl was brought to the house of the young man's relative in the village where they stayed for half an hour. The girl refused to leave the car, was screaming and asking for help.

"I can't live without you and you compelled me to do it" - said the man, who announced happily to everybody that he got married.

In an attempt to avoid the noise being heard by neighbors, Amaryllis was driven to another relative's house. Again, she refused to get out of the car, so the kidnappers asked a female relative to talk to her. She told the girl *"You are already our daughter-in-law and please get out of the car."*

When she again refused, the kidnappers resorted to violence to drag Amaryllis out of the vehicle – one of them held his hand over her mouth to ensure that her screams wouldn't be heard while the others grabbed her by the arms and carried her into the house, her toes barely touching the floor. Within seconds, they got into a bedroom through the hall.

For three hours she was sitting on the cold floor, shivering with fear and cold. An electric heater was brought for her but she turned it off and kicked it away.

Amaryllis was asking everyone for help, begging them to take her home. She was calling for her mom, who she knew was far away and could not help her child. Everybody was trying to calm the girl down telling her various kidnap stories that ended in marriage. For them, abduction was an accepted practice and they were demonstrating their belief that women should obey decisions and mechanisms designed by men to restrict women's freedom.

Later, the man's family was informed that Amaryllis' parents were searching for her, so the kidnappers once again tried to hide Amaryllis by taking her to a neighbor's place to cover up their tracks. They assured the neighbor that the girl had left home voluntarily.

Amaryllis thought she would be never found and would be forced to become the kidnapper's wife. She worried this would also mean an end to her studies.

Shortly afterward, the man's father arrived and decided to take the girl to another relative's house - the fourth house she had been to.

They told Amaryllis not to worry, that her parents would reconcile with the boy's family, which was of course a lie. They were ready to promise her everything just to get her consent to marriage at that moment.

Late that night, there was a knock on the door. Police officers entered the house. In an attempt to mislead the police, the host family members told them that the kidnapped girl was not in their house.

"It's me here, Amaryllis!" - Suddenly the girl's voice came out of the darkness.

Within minutes, Amaryllis was sitting in the police vehicle. She could not say a word as if she was deprived of her ability to speak. She waited for her parents in the police car. Suddenly she saw her mom and her heart sank, waiting desperately to hear what her mom would say first.

"No matter what happens, you are still our child and I will never leave you," said her mother overwhelmed with excitement, and kissed one of the police officers standing nearby.

"Take me home" - mumbled the girl and realized that her voice was coming back.

The parents drove the girl home, and the police arrested all four kidnappers. All of them are awaiting trial before a jury.

It took Amaryllis several long months to recover. At times she found it very difficult to carry on with her life following her experience, yet she managed to pull herself together and continue to fight for her goals with the help of the supportive people

around her. The young man's relatives and friends often show up at their house begging her not to continue the case against the kidnappers, but Amaryllis' father does not let them approach the girl.

Amaryllis is happy about the laws that protected her - *"I saw how everyone cared about me,"* says Amaryllis assuring the police that such incidents take place against girls' will and are never consensual. Equipped with this knowledge, the police will be able to help young women better.

"We need to dedicate our lives to pursuing our dreams and not listening to others," says Amaryllis, who changed her long-cherished dream and chose the profession of a lawyer instead of a doctor.

Less than a year has passed since the kidnapping. The girl has already turned 18 and has successfully passed the national exams. Currently, she is about to start her professional training.

Despite everything, Amaryllis is happy but adds that she will always live with this burden. Her experience is her motivation to continue the fight.

Narilatha's story

"You have to wait for your husband by the window while he's on his way home from work. The minute you see him, you must immediately start heating the dinner. While he is climbing up the stairs and washing his hands, you must have the table already laid" – this was the instruction 16-year-old Narilatha was obliged to scrupulously follow. If her husband happened not to like her service, he would start yelling. Her mother-in-law would tell her in a reproaching tone – *"you know your husband's whims, don't you? Why on earth haven't you learned them so far?"*

Previously, the girl had obeyed her mom and performed her orders – *"do the washing-up, tidy up the rooms, wash the floors."* Later, when Narilatha's brother was born, taking care of her baby brother, changing his diapers, and walking with him were added to her chores.

Narilatha's mom had always dreamed of having a baby boy. She was worried that she would have two daughters. When she gave birth to Narilatha's younger sister, the doctors noticed the woman weep. She was deeply frustrated and unhappy about the arrival of another girl.

The sex of the baby was always a crucial factor for her mother, she always wanted a boy. Narilatha would often hear her mother say – *"Having a boy is vital for each family since everything belongs to the boy. Why bother to educate a girl if she gets married by all means and the husband takes care of her."* Her mother felt constant disappointment over her two girls, and never lost hope of having a baby boy one day.

The sisters felt huge pressure growing up knowing their mother wished she had a boy. Narilatha's sister had eye problems, so her mother directed her outrage mostly at Narilatha. Despite this, her mother was confident that with Narilatha's good looks, she would easily find a suitable husband for her child.

"Certainly, a girl must be pretty. If a woman has physical defects, she is doomed to be hated as a bride. She will be treated rudely and indifferently, like a flawed

item, and no one will even bother to notice her existence. Yet, she will still be kept at home as it's a pity to throw her away since you never know when she might come in handy to the owner."

This was the purpose Narilatha's sister had in the eyes of her mother. The woman knew it would be difficult to find a spouse for her younger daughter, so she tried to find a good "bargain" for the older one at least.

Narilatha's mother was 16 when she got married, and the finances of her husband's family were a key factor in her family's choice of match.

Despite growing up in a large family in the south-eastern part of Georgia, Narilatha never felt happy at home.

Her dad generally worked abroad. So, the children were raised mainly by their mother. He had no idea how brutally his wife was treating Narilatha.

During one of the beatings, Narilatha's father was in Georgia and she managed to tell her dad how cruel her mother was to her, upon which Narilatha's parents argued. *"Leave the child alone! Don't yell at her!"* he told his wife.

Later, her mother beat Narilatha ten times more ruthlessly – *"why did you tell on me to your father, why did you provoke him to the fight, you are the enemy to our family!"* These words uttered by her mom stayed in Narilatha's mind forever. *"Am I really the enemy of my family, perhaps I should have remained silent and kept everything secret"* - she felt guilty, so she decided never to tell anything to her dad anymore. Nor did she dare to tell him that mom was forcing her to marry early.

One day, out of the blue, Narilatha's mother heard of her own mother's death. The ashes were brought to her home. Narilatha was eight at the time and can recall quite vividly how her mother was punching herself in the head. After that, she became even more merciless towards her eldest daughter.

Narilatha's life became unbearable after her brother's birth. In addition to housework, the 13-year-old girl now had to take care of her brother as well.

Despite her efforts to study when she could, she started to significantly lag behind in her studies and get bad grades. Every evening she had to wash the gypsum floors.



To fit her studies around her chores, she had to get up early in the morning while everyone was asleep to do her homework. She knew that instead of doing homework, she would have to look after her baby brother at home. Her mother, holding the baby in her arms, would wait at the house doors for her to return from school, leaving her unable to study when she got home from school.

Soon after she turned 14, a young man from her village said he was in love with Narilatha. He was from a wealthy family, so Narilatha's mother was happy with him as a potential husband for her daughter. *"My mom only cared about fortune and money, she thought it would guarantee me a rosy future,"* says the girl, who did not care about the boy's income and property. She knew from the very beginning that the marriage would not bring her happiness.

"Be grateful that he likes you! If I were a boy, I would not even look at you! There is no woman happier than me! The best boy in the whole district loves my girl!" – Narilatha's mother would say, overjoyed with the sight of the desired groom.

From that moment, the young man did not leave Narilatha alone. He was seven years older than her. *"I am thinking seriously about you and I want to marry you. I'll educate you and support you"* - the young man was expressing his love to Narilatha with selfish zeal, yet with a tacit implication that she would have to say goodbye to her childhood and youth to become a servant and property of her husband.

Narilatha's mother forced her to communicate with him and encouraged her to receive the gifts he offered. The young man often phoned Narilatha to tell her about his love, promising that if she married him, he would take care of her and cherish every moment with her. The girl thought perhaps it was a way out and she would be able to dedicate time to learning. She became fascinated by his proposal as an opportunity to escape from her gloomy and harsh reality. However, Narilatha felt affection for the man only when talking with him on the phone, whenever she saw him in person she would develop an unpleasant sensation in her stomach.

Since that day, organizing the engagement became her mother's number one concern. *"You have to marry him, he is from a decent family, they have lots of money, you will live in a big and beautiful house and they will take good care of you"* – with these words, mom would start talking with Narilatha but end up beating her if she sensed even the slightest resistance from the girl.

"It hurt a lot, it was painful, and I cried, but still I kept saying out loud that I did not want to marry him" - says Narilatha. Exhausted with sobbing and pain, she would repeat these words in her heart, thinking that her voice was heard to the whole world, reaching all parts of the country, and forcing people to unite to rescue her.

After an outrageous cycle of violence, Narilatha would wake up to find that she was alone again and her imagination had nothing to do with reality.

Narilatha's mother had made a decision a long time ago - she firmly intended to hand her daughter over to the man.

The 14-year-old girl even considered running away from home, but she would end up each time vividly envisioning herself walking through underground stations begging for money. The prospect frightened her, and the thoughts of fleeing home would disappear from the child's mind.

The efforts of the bridegroom and Narilatha's mother finally yielded fruit. She was forced to consent to the marriage because she had no other choice.

The engagement party took place in 2000, the second day after she finished her ninth grade when she turned 15. Their house was full of the bridegroom's relatives who were treated to tea - this meant that the man's family had received consent to wed the child. The mother-in-law put a ring on the girl's finger. Narilatha was fascinated by the brilliance of the ring - she could not realize then that the glittering and delicate ring was not a toy but rather a symbol marking the end of her childhood and the beginning of her life as the man's possession.

From then on, Narilatha was expected to obey her fiancé's demands. She first realized this when he objected to her attending the school prom without his permission.

For the ninth grade graduation, Narilatha's mom bought a prom dress and a pair of shoes for her 15-year-old daughter. Narilatha was getting ready for the prom enthusiastically.

"Why don't I know that you have a prom? What if I don't want to let you go?" - The man told the girl on the phone.

"Why should I ask you? My mother has already consented," Narilatha replied.

"You have to ask me from now on because I am your fiancé!" – said the man in an authoritative and dissatisfied tone.

The girl started crying. She asked her mom to return the ring and cancel the wedding.

Having heard that, her mother became furious "*Don't even dare to refuse now when we have already given our approval.*" Hearing the argument, Narilatha's grandmother joined the dispute saying – "*we will be disgraced in the whole world; maybe the bridegroom has already kissed you, then who will want to marry such a girl!*" There was no end to the mother's and grandmother's insistence that the cancellation of the engagement on the girl's side would be a massive disaster and bring shame to the family. The main reason was that the family would find it difficult to marry off Narilatha after that.

Narilatha managed to go to the prom despite her fiancé's objections, not changing her plans felt like her first victory against him. He told her not to stay until late, and that he was going to pick her up.

No sooner was the table set that her fiancé arrived to pick her up. Narilatha refused to leave the party and rebuked him for appearing so early.

After three hours the bridegroom showed up again – "*You have eaten already, right? Let's go home now.*" Narilatha could hardly hold back her tears, she wanted to scream with all her might, to protest loudly against the injustice, but she could not even make a sound. Tears rushed down her cheeks the minute he left her at the doorstep of her home and drove off.

"*You are my future wife and I will decide when and where you can go*"- these were the words he shouted to the weeping girl standing at the gates, and these words reminded her every day of her obligation to obey the man.

Whenever she complained to her parents about the restrictions her fiancé would come up with, they replied – "*He does it because he loves you and fears that someone else may kidnap you. The minute you get married, things will change.*"

When she turned 16 she celebrated her birthday with her fiancé and his family

members. "*I have heard that girls celebrate their 'Sweet Sixteen' with their peers, but I spent my birthday with my fiancé and his family. He was 23 years old then. We had been cooking for two days. The table was set in my house and the feast began, but I was somewhere else, in my dreams. So it was my Sweet Sixteenth party - the beginning of disappointments and unfulfilled expectations.*"

Soon the wedding day arrived. Narilatha found herself in the center of the 500-guest wedding reception with her husband-to-be.

The wedding party continued until the next day. Narilatha's anxiety about moving from her family home to her husband's house did not go unnoticed by her husband.

Overwhelmed with emotion, she broke down as she hugged her little brother goodbye. Tears were flooding down her cheeks as her husband forced her to let the boy go.

On the wedding night, the husband sat down face to face with the girl and asked,

"*Why did you cry? You should be blissfully happy that you have married a guy like me. From today on, I will be your master and without my consent, you won't be allowed even to breathe. If you refuse to listen, the door is open and you can leave.*"

The girl was nervously wriggling a part of her wedding dress around her finger. Her veil was wet with tears and sweat. She could not look at her husband, she wanted to cover her ears with her hands, but she couldn't move.

That evening new rules were created for her. Her husband now believed he had full control of her body, but her heart and mind remained with her Barbie dolls, for which she had been sewing dresses with her younger sister just two days before.

A newly-wed woman is prohibited to leave the house for a month. Moreover, she is not allowed even to look out of the window for a long time – "*what will people say, she is a new bride and why is she looking out of the window?*"

Whenever the girl was left alone in the house, she would ask her sister to bring the Barbie dolls and play with her. It was the only thing connecting her back to her childhood.

Although Narilatha blamed her mom for the way her life developed, she still missed her. She wanted to hug her mom and cry like a baby, but she was forbidden.

One day, Narilatha caught a glimpse from the window of her mom talking to a next-door neighbor. Narilatha was excited to see her, and she asked her husband to let her go to meet her mom.

"Know your place!" - The man replied without even looking at her.

Eventually, Narilatha's mother-in-law asked her son to take Narilatha for a walk where she met her mother seemingly by chance.

The girl flung her hands around her mother's body, put her head on her chest, and murmured – *"Mom, I miss you, I miss you!"* though she is not sure whether she heard her.

A month after the marriage, Narilatha's mom called to invite her and her husband to a picnic. The girl told her husband, who yelled at her – *"you should have told me before saying yes to your mom, so we will not go anywhere and you will learn a lesson!"*

Narilatha protested fiercely, and her husband continued swearing and yelling. She even tried to open the door and leave the house – *"momentarily, I became deaf and saw sparks in my eyes. Once the deafness was gone, I could hear a whizzing sound in my ears. My husband violently punched me in the head. It was the first time he physically abused me,"* recalls the girl, who immediately phoned her mom. Narilatha hoped her mom would support her once she heard about the violence, but instead, her mother blamed her, saying *"he is your husband and do whatever he tells you."*

Narilatha's whole family was teaching her how she should obey and serve her spouse.

Once her mother-in-law said: *"when your husband tells you that Matsoni (Georgian sour cream) is black, even if you see the Matsoni is white, you mustn't say that, you have to agree with your husband and say - yes, Matsoni is really black."* This implied that she should not resist her husband when he was violent to her.

"Why?— Why can't I explain to my husband that I don't deserve to be beaten as I have done nothing bad, he should know that I am not involved in anything indecent" - The girl would say.

The mother-in-law would reply – *"you are his wife, so you have to listen to your husband in everything. Every man is a dog, every man barks, and they need to be cuddled and caressed— you have to get used to it."* She was implying that violence was always justified and a man could always find a reason to call his wife useless, stupid, and ugly and periodically even punch her.

Narilatha was allowed neither to laugh nor cry. Every tear rolling down the girl's face would be followed by insults – *"wipe off that urine from your eyes."*

Narilatha's husband had a good reputation in the neighborhood; he had received a proper education and had a good job. Everybody respected him. Yet he was a completely different man behind closed doors - it was a space where he could freely demonstrate his power and authority.

Restrictions and prohibitions on Narilatha became more and more severe. The girl was not allowed to go outside the house. She rarely went to school. She was not allowed to wear make-up - he did not like Narilatha wearing makeup. She was forbidden to wear tight pants, could only wear long dresses, and loose tightly-buttoned clothes. Her husband was even jealous of the characters from the TV series she watched – *"you probably like some of the actors and that's why you are watching them."* Eventually, she dropped out of school as she was told – *"you are a daughter-in-law in this house and not a pupil."*

Several times Narilatha attempted to stay with her mother, though she always ended up returning to her husband's home following his relentless humiliation and abuse. The husband could argue with her over anything, even how she poured the tea. Narilatha had to serve her husband the way he liked it. If she failed to do things according to her husband's demands, he would immediately start yelling and swearing - *"He loved punching me behind my ears. He could have slapped me in my face, but he knew that it would cause swelling and people would notice it."* This was the tea ritual in Narilatha's home.

Gradually the family managed to isolate the girl away from everyone and everything. She was prohibited from communicating with her girlfriends and ended up losing touch with some of her peers whom she had known for years.

Several years passed, and Narilatha had not had a child. Her husband blamed her for their infertility and took her to various doctors.

Five years after the marriage, when Narilatha was six months pregnant, the violence and humiliation led her to attempt suicide. She survived the attempt and gave birth to her first child at the age of 21.

Her second baby followed a few years later, and all her care and attention was focused on the children.

Narilatha's husband did not refrain from being violent against his wife either during her pregnancy or in the presence of their children. Her eldest son, when he was only four, would throw pillows at his dad in an attempt to protect his mom from the violence.

Narilatha eventually saw a psychologist about her depression. *"I was looking in the mirror and could not see myself - this day has come."* Her condition was worsened by the deterioration of her physical health. She had no money of her own, so she was unable to consult a doctor. When her pain worsened and she started to experience difficulties walking, the family took her to the doctor. She was diagnosed with a very serious illness.

"Only then for the first time over the years did I notice remorse in my husband's eyes and words," says Narilatha, who categorically refused to be treated, dreaming of death as the only way out of her unbearable life.

Because of her illness, everyone changed their attitude towards Narilatha. For the first time, her husband and family members showed care and respect.

In the end, Narilatha agreed to the medical treatment for the sake of her children. After a few months, the pain disappeared and she was able to get back on her feet, only to see her husband turning into a monster again.

Meanwhile, the eldest child had already reached school age. Narilatha devoted all her attention to the child's education. She wanted to do everything for her child that she had missed herself, and her husband supported her.

In 2017, Narilatha with her husband and children moved to a new house located next door to her husband's family. The woman thought that the change of the residence would improve her husband's temper, yet she was bitterly mistaken – *"his evil nature*

reappeared with the usual cruelty in the new house, he was still frightfully jealous and constantly controlled me," says Narilatha, recalling another incident of violence shortly after moving to the new house.

Narilatha was begging her husband to allow her to take driving lessons, but he would always refuse. Narilatha protested and told her husband that she would by all means learn to drive a car. No sooner had she finished the words that she blacked out – the man had taken her in his hands and hit his head on her nose.

Narilatha's sister and mother, who were visiting, witnessed the violence. Narilatha's mother now saw with her own eyes her daughter being brutally beaten.

The woman started yelling at her son-in-law and tried to take her daughter back home. While Narilatha was packing her belongings, the husband apologized – *"I will change and do everything for you."* She didn't leave that day. The violence became worse and worse. Narilatha decided she needed to put an end to the cycle of violence she was living in. She began searching for information about how she could access support for victims of domestic violence.

One night, during an attack, Narilatha called the police. She was on the phone when her husband snatched her mobile phone and started begging for an apology. He promised the violence would never happen again if she agreed not to call the police. That was the moment Narilatha understood that she was able to escape from her husband's dominance.

She soon learned about the existence of a crisis center and an NGO. She decided not to act hastily, she wanted to scrutinize everything. Within several months, Narilatha had the full information about her rights and knew what to do. She confided her story with her therapist, who promised to support her.

One day Narilatha told her husband that she had consulted lawyers and if he dared to punch her again, she would report him. This scared the man a little. From that day, he expressed his anger only verbally and did not dare physically abuse his wife.

Narilatha soon discovered that her husband had a bug installed in the house, enabling him to listen to his wife while he was away. She deactivated it and hid it in a secret place. When the husband returned from work, he noticed the device was gone and

started yelling and swearing. He walked from one room to another searching for the equipment. Narilatha had seen her husband furious many times, but this felt like another level.

It dawned on Narilatha that the day had finally arrived to put an end to everything. She started searching for her phone but could not find it. She knew it was her husband who hid it. She called the police using her son's mobile phone.

When the husband heard that Narilatha had called the police, he immediately summoned his parents. They started cursing and swearing at their daughter-in-law – *“What? You have reported on your husband? It is the worst thing a woman can do.”*

The police issued a one-month restraining order against the abusive husband and barred him from approaching Narilatha.

The following several months of legal proceedings were difficult for Narilatha, but eventually, she managed to get a divorce and escape from her husband after twenty years of violence.

Now Narilatha is 35 years old and lives together with her children. *“This is the moment when I continue living,”* says Narilatha. . Thanks to her determination, she already has a job and earns her own income. She managed to receive her share of the husband's property, and he was also ordered to pay alimony for the children.

“I am no longer afraid of the person who used to terrify me, everything has changed,” says Narilatha. She now knows her rights and that the law is there to protect her. She uses this knowledge when communicating with her ex-husband.

Whenever Narilatha's relatives hear of any incident of domestic violence, they immediately turn to her story as an example. The young woman has become a role model for her relatives.

***“I hope I will always laugh, I do not want worries, tension, stress, and tears anymore. I no longer want to be locked up in the house, I no longer want to live in the fear of imminent violence,”* says Narilatha. She wants other women to know that they can stand up to the violence, and urges the state to do more to protect women.**

Camelia's story

Camelia grew up in a traditional family living in the south-eastern part of Georgia. Her parents and family members respected her wishes and encouraged her to study. Camelia started school with 10 other girls, but by the time they were in the twelfth grade, there were only four other girls in the class. The other girls had dropped out of school to be married. In addition to studying, the girl was keen on football and often played with boys.

In 2014, after leaving school, she entered a university, the faculty of medicine, and moved to Tbilisi.

Camelia thinks that the minute a girl is born to a family the parents start thinking about her wedding and collecting dowry for their daughter. The decisive factor in choosing a fiancé is the financial status of the man's family.

Camelia's family had never talked about marrying off their daughter. Nor did anyone force her to start a family at a young age.

This continued until she openly announced her decision not to marry.

As she began her second year at university when everybody began pushing her to marry – saying, *“Look, everyone your age already has children so what are you thinking about!”*

At university, Camelia met a young man who was studying in the same department. After a while, they fell in love with each other. She told her parents about their romance. With relationships outside of marriage unacceptable in their community, Camelia's parents swiftly arranged the engagement. At 23, Camellia found herself engaged.

The engagement was held in the house of Camelia's parents in the south-eastern region of Georgia, in 2017. As the girl requested, only thirty people were invited to the engagement party.



In the morning, Camelia went to a beauty salon to have her hair and makeup done. The family members were busy with the preparations, helped by relatives and neighbors.

In the afternoon, the man's family appeared, bringing the wedding ring and dress - the bride has to wear the dress on the day of her engagement.

The elders were treated with sweet tea in festively decorated glasses - the bride has to perform the ceremony.

On the day of the engagement, Camelia seemed timid and shy. The engagement party ended amid strong winds and heavy rain.

A few weeks later after the engagement, Camelia realized that her fiancé was not the person she wanted to be with forever. This had been triggered by a sudden change in his mood. She decided it would be better to cancel the wedding rather than face a divorce in the future.

It was difficult for her to break the news to her parents. Camelia told them that she was not sure whether she loved her husband-to-be. Rather than saying she wanted to cancel the wedding, she first asked to postpone the date. This would give her extra time to think things over. The parents agreed, if she was not sure about her decision, they could call off the engagement, which she eagerly consented to. The next morning, her parents wanted to know why she didn't want to get married. Her father said, *"I can cancel the wedding only if he physically abused you, otherwise I cannot call off the wedding because it will disgrace our family reputation"* - said the father. Her mother agreed.

In their community, it is the father who is considered to be the head of the family - the person who makes all important decisions, including about the marriage of their daughter. Other members of the family must obey the father's decision without any objections.

From that moment on, Camelia was pressured to go through with the marriage. *"It was your choice, so you can't refuse now!"* - Her parents were scolding her, reminding her of the risk to their reputation if she didn't marry the man.

Her father presented her with an ultimatum - if she would refuse to marry, he would stop paying her tuition fees and forbid her to go to university. This would completely cut off Camelia's way out.

It had never occurred to Camelia that her decision would cause such a fierce reaction from her parents. When her fiancé was visiting, her father thought she didn't pay him proper attention and he slapped her in the face, *"Why did you meet him so coldly? Phone him right now and apologize!"* –

All telephone conversations with her dad ended up in arguments and shouting.

She was still attending lectures, though she felt detached. She couldn't concentrate, the only thing she was thinking about was how to convince her parents to cancel the wedding. Sometimes, she even blamed herself.

For a long time, Camelia didn't confide in anyone. Eventually, she told her university professor and friends about her worries, and she decided to put an end to the tormenting reality that had become a part of her daily life.

To escape the forced marriage, she turned to the police for help. With their support, she then spent several weeks in a women's refuge.

"My decision to report to the police was 500% correct!" she says and adds that her life has changed for the better ever since.

The decision was approved by residents in her village. Her family realized that they do not have the right to interfere with their daughter's decisions or force her to marry someone she doesn't want to.

The engagement presents were returned, and the wedding was canceled.

Camelia is now 25 and urges girls and women to have courage. Camelia encourages girls who may find themselves forced into marriage to turn to their teachers for support.

"We all write our own life story!"

Calathea's story

"A 17-18-year-old girl is considered to be an unmarried, left-out woman. Everyone believes so," says Calathea, recalling a time when a 12-year-old girl in their village was made to marry a man of 32 years old.

"I was living a monotonous life" - Calathea was obediently following the rules and norms set for girls. Her actions were mainly controlled by her cousins, who were boys. Although Calathea was raised by her parents, the relatives could easily impose restrictions on the girl as well. Calathea had no right to go anywhere on her own. Whenever she went out, mom would always warn her to stay somewhere around so that she could watch her easily.

Calathea was born in Russia. When she was one year old her family moved to the south-eastern region of Georgia.

"My parents cared more for my brother. They wanted him to get a degree so that he could be an educated and successful person in the family, whereas I would stay at home, marry, and leave the family."

Calathea was 15 when those wishing to marry her appeared in the village. Her father objected – *"my daughter cannot get married until the age of 18,"* but the girl's mother thought one of the men would make a good match.

His family would tell the mother, *"The family is strong financially, they will take good care of your child; your daughter is still very young, and the man is 29 years old, which means they will understand each other and have no problems in the family"* *"Nobody talked to me about the marriage, the negotiations were held by my parents,"* says Calathea, whose family was visited four times by the relatives of the-bridegroom-to-be.

Upon the fifth visit, the father consented to give Calathea in marriage – *"when my parents asked me if I wanted to marry the guy, I said 'you decide as you wish'. I knew I would not be able to find enough strength in myself to*

resist, so it was useless to object since they would do whatever they wanted anyway."

Calathea's family wasn't struggling for money. "It was the pressure from the community that my family could not oppose. That's why they finally gave their consent to the marriage," thinks Calathea, whose parents got married when they were adults.

After that, the negotiations continued in the traditional way. The women who visited Calathea's house were treated to sweet tea. The tea ceremony means that the girl's family agreed to marry off the child. The engagement party was planned for September 2020, with the wedding reception two years later, when the girl would have turned 17. These were the terms the families agreed.

"This is how we are all deceived," says Calathea who knew the man's family would speed up the wedding. She did not even consider appealing to anybody for help for fear of problems with her parents and relatives.

After the engagement, Calathea was obliged to go for walks with her fiancé – *"I did not know much about him, I did not talk to him, when I was with him, I even refused to drink water. I went out with him because of my parents; they wanted me to do so."*

The man noticed that she did not like him, so he decided to kidnap her. He was sure that after the abduction, to protect her honor and her family's, Calathea would be forced to stay with him.

During another date, the couple was supposed to go for a walk but instead, he took Calathea to his sister's house. His sister was out, but he assured Calathea she'd be home soon. Suddenly she heard the sound of the door being locked. She was scared but didn't dare speak.

Then he picked up her phone, switched it off, and put it in his pocket. She asked him to give her the phone back and take her home. He chuckled and replied no, she was kidnapped. Calathea thought the man was kidding, but she soon realized it was not a joke.

"Please, take me home and I promise not to tell anyone anything about this" - the girl started begging, she thought perhaps she would convince her kidnapper to return her to her parents.



He answered, *"I cannot take you home. People will say I'm a loser, as everyone knows that I have kidnapped you. You are already mine, face it!"*

The minute he went into another room, Calathea tried to escape. She grabbed her bag, climbed on the couch, and tried to jump out of the second-floor window. She thought she would be able to escape, get into a taxi, and go home. But he saw her on the window sill and pulled her back.

Calathea understood that he was not going to return her home, that she'd have to find a way to escape. After the incident with the window, he'd locked all the windows, but still, Calathea managed to slip out onto the balcony. She saw two people downstairs and called out to them, telling them she had been kidnapped. His relatives who were also nearby told the neighbors that the girl was their bride and stopped them calling the police.

When he heard that the girl asked his neighbors for help, he was furious – *"why are you trying to disgrace me in front of my neighbors."*

Later, he promised the girl he would take her back home because he feared that the neighbors would call the police. Calathea believed him. *"Probably because I had no other options,"* says the girl.

After a while, he called a taxi, telling her he was taking her home. She got in, excited to be returning home to her parents, but when the taxi drove past her home, Calathea realized that it had been another lie. She asked the taxi driver for help, telling him she had been kidnapped. The driver slowed down, but when the kidnapper ordered him to drive faster, he obeyed.

The kidnapper brought Calathea to his relative's house, telling them she was 16 years old and she wanted to marry the man on her own. The host woman took the girl to the kitchen, where the child seized the opportunity to tell the woman everything; that she was only 15 and didn't want to get married. The woman promised to help but her phone did not work. She asked the man she was living with for help.

"If I call your father now, he will think that I am also involved in the matter, so I cannot help you," said the man.

Having heard that, the woman started getting ready to take the girl home. Calathea's fiancé instead promised that he would take her back home.

"My fiancé said - if she is weeping so bitterly in front of people why should I want to marry her?! I'll take and throw her to her father's doors, like garbage."

Calathea asked the woman to accompany them as she knew her fiancé was lying again, but the woman decided to trust the kidnapper, and the two of them left.

After that, the girl was forced into the vehicle again and taken in an unknown direction. *"I again noticed that we went past my house. I soon understood that I was being taken to a completely strange place."*

He took her to another relative's house. There were two women. As she got out of the car, Calathea started screaming and asking for their help. Suddenly he scooped the girl up and tried to take her inside the house. Calathea resisted, hurting her hand whilst holding on to the door.

*"Accept that you cannot go back home! Even if you do not like me, you are already my wife! Or I will f*** you and then you can go back."* – he threatened. He believed that leaving her after their marriage would damage and disgrace her reputation.

The next day, Calathea was allowed to phone her father. Her kidnapper coached her on what to say, *"Tell your dad that you are OK, that you have not been kidnapped and that you decided to marry."*

"If you were taken by force and you do not want to stay, tell me and I will bring you back home" – her father told Calathea. She replied "yes". The kidnapper's relatives did not realize what she was saying to her dad.

Calathea's father demanded the man return his daughter otherwise he would go to the police. The kidnapper's family was shocked by his reaction.

In an attempt to persuade the girl to marry, the man's female relatives assured the girl that they had got married themselves at the age of 13. They said that at first, they did not like their husbands, but then they got used to them, had children, and even fell in love with their men. Once the kidnappers realized that Calathea's father might

call the police, they forced the girl into the car again, locked the doors, and drove in the direction of Tbilisi. After getting to the city, they stopped at a restaurant to have something to eat and rest.

The girl told the kidnappers she needed to go to the restroom. Once inside, Calathea asked a woman, who happened to work at the restaurant, if she could borrow her phone. She called her father and gave him the address of the restaurant.

While she was on the phone, the man rattled on the door, trying to open it and shouting, – *“Why are you taking so long? Why won't you come out?”*. The female employee blocked the doorway to stop him from getting in – *“Can't you see it's a women's toilet? Wait outside!”*

Calathea told her everything about her abduction, and the woman promised not to let anyone but the police take her away.

When the police arrived, the man and his relatives were no longer to be seen. Calathea told the police everything. She asked the police officers not to take her home, in case she was pressured into changing her statement. Calathea was taken to a shelter for victims of violence.

The kidnapper went into hiding, but several days later, he was found and arrested by the police. He has been remanded in custody and is currently awaiting trial.

Calathea hopes she is the last kidnapped girl, that no one else has to go through what she experienced. She believes that raising public awareness and providing information to people is the best solution – *“Many girls do not know how to act in such situations, who to turn to for help.”*

She believes that the school must pay more attention to eighth and ninth grade girls, and take action to protect them. *“I have never heard the school expressing its strict position about any child marriage,”* says Calathea, recalling the time when she was not able to go to school for eight months in the eighth grade because her family learned she was going to be kidnapped, and it had never occurred to the school to find out the reason for the child's absence or support the girl in any way.

“I've recently heard that a girl was kidnapped. She wanted to go back home, but her parents refused to accept her – the village would have condemned the family because of that. So the child had to stay with the kidnapper. I understand very well what the girl has gone through emotionally because I experienced the same!” says Calathea. She believes that things ended differently for her because the police intervened, and she was supported by her parents. While Calathea feels hopeful about the future, she remains uncertain about what it holds. She fears that if her kidnapper is sent to jail, his family may decide to take revenge on her, but she will not drop the case.

“We need support from classmates, friends, parents, and the public,” she says.

Calathea is focused on justice and believes that he should be held accountable for what he has done. People around her express sympathy for the man who kidnapped her, and blame her for going to the police and getting him ‘in trouble’. Despite this, she is determined that he should face the consequences of breaking the law.

After spending several months in the shelter, Calathea returned home to her parents. While she was away, she'd felt empty without them, but had feared that they might be angry with her – *“it turned out differently though, we got on better with each other since then, the tragedy united us.”*

Her father is keen that Calathea starts a new life, and her mother promised never to make the same mistake. They promised never again to think about marrying off their child. Instead, they are supporting her to continue with her studies and they make important decisions together as a family. *“I'm not going to go back to the same environment,”* says the girl, who is trying to forget the incident and get ready to make new friends and start new relationships.

Calathea's message to her peers, if they ever get kidnapped, is not to believe their lies and go back home by any means, it doesn't matter how much time has passed. “It is a huge lie to tell girls of my age – you will get used to and fall in love with him. Nonsense! You can never fall in love with the man who kidnaps you. You just get used to the reality and you are forced to convince yourself that this is the life you deserve.”

Kesane's story

Kesane was 15 when she was kidnapped.

Growing up in Tbilisi, she had often seen her father physically abusing her mother. She thought it was normal.

She also saw her brother enjoying more freedom than she was allowed as a girl. Her parents had never cared about what she wanted from life, instead, they worried about what the neighbors would think. Kesane had a boyfriend, but the boy's mother did not like her – “*she's short,*” she used to say. As a result of her interference, the couple broke up. It was then another young man appeared in her life, who would later become her husband. In 2008, Kesane had been seeing her boyfriend for about two months when the boy kidnapped her. Her family did not report this to the police. While her parents brought her back home, she was still forced to marry this man. It is common for community pressure to protect the honor of the girl and her family resulting in girls being forced to marry the men who kidnap them. After the marriage, Kesane's husband forced her to give up her studies and social life.

“I was a child but I thought I was so grown-up” - reflects 27-year-old Kesane.

Kesane was nine-months pregnant when her husband first abused her physically. He had been abusing before then, controlling her every move, he forbade her to walk out onto the balcony to hang the laundry out to dry.

Her husband was doing to her what she'd seen her father do to her mother throughout her life.

Her husband controlled everything in Kesane's life, from her hair length and make-up to her daily household chores. He even had surveillance cameras installed in the rooms. Whenever he returned home, he would ask his wife what she had been doing during the day – and her story had to match up with what the cameras showed. He would even go through her phone.

Before he beat her, he would take their three children to another room. They would hear the sounds of their mother crying.

Kesane lived in fear of her husband and was constantly thinking about the next reason her husband would find to attack and insult her again.

He forbade her from looking at anyone, telling her to look down at the ground. If he caught her accidentally looking at a passerby on the street, he would swear at her.

Whenever he left the house, he would lock the door with her inside. *“Even in jails, prisoners do not have the conditions that my husband had created for me. If the house had caught on fire, no one would have ever been able to rescue me.”* Over time she learned from the way he opened the door whether it would end in violence.

Living with her husband changed Kesane in many ways. She lost everybody and everything.

One day she even turned to her parents for help. Instead, they told her to give him another chance. She gave him seemingly endless chances.

When she had to leave the house, she had to call her husband and leave the phone on loudspeaker mode in her bag. That way he could know where she was. He would listen to every step his wife was making, her breathing, getting on and off the bus, entering the supermarket, or buying groceries.

Kesane could no longer see her friends and relatives. If she bumped into someone on the street, she would always say she was in a hurry and run home. Everybody was surprised and told her – *“you have so many things to do that you can't stay for a five-minute talk?!”* It wasn't the housework but her husband who was waiting for her at home, who would hurt her if she was even a minute late home. Whether she was picking up the children from school or doing the shopping, she tried not to be late. She would run up the stairs, gasping for breath, just to avoid enraging her husband. Kesane remained silent, telling no one about the violence she faced. Her husband's violence was getting more and more relentless. *“Once he breaks you, then he will always want more - it's the psychology of the abuser,”* says Kesane, reflecting on her husband's cruel and ruthless nature.



Kesane reached out to a social worker for an unrelated reason, and they suspected she was a victim of violence. Kesane told her everything. The social worker started to visit the family and encouraged Kesane to report her husband to the police.

With the support of her social worker, Kesane was finally able to go to the police. Her ex-husband was immediately arrested and was sent to prison on domestic violence charges.

Kesane has moved on to a new phase of her life. She's looking forward to continuing her education, having dropped out of school in the ninth grade to marry. Looking after her three children on her own doesn't leave her a lot of free time to study, but she is determined. *"If you knock, the door will open for you, so if you speak up, you will certainly be helped,"* says Kesane. She encourages neighbors and onlookers who may suspect violence to call the police, adding that this may have given her the courage to speak up.

"Every victim hopes the abuser will change, improve, but this is merely our imagination and illusion," adds Kesane.

Kesane is grateful to the people who supported her to escape her abusive husband and live a free and independent life.



Chinara's story



Chinara Kojaeva is from a village in the Tetrtskaro district. She was born at the end of August 2000. Her name means a "dream tree" in Georgian. As a child, she often dreamt of people living a full life somewhere far away, but she saw nothing but her small village and the whitewashed house of her family. She firmly believed that if she studied and got a good education, she would be able to achieve success and bring fame to her family and village.

The family lived in poverty. Only her father and brothers worked on a farm, the only source of income for the family. Chinara's mother had married at 18, and her life was dominated by taking care of the home from that moment on.

Growing up, Chinara and her sister lived under different rules to their two brothers, with the girls forbidden to do many of the things their brothers could do.

Chinara's sister was very young when she got married.

In 2015, Chinara left school after ninth grade with a basic education. She would have needed to travel to a neighboring village to continue past the ninth grade, and her parents said they couldn't afford it. Her parents worried that educated women develop their own reasoning - which, in their opinion, is not good for the family and the girl's future husband.

Chinara's life, like her mother's, was now dominated by household chores. *"Once a girl turns 14 years old, potential suitors start visiting her family, requesting the parents' permission to marry the girl. I have seen many tearful underage brides at the wedding reception who did not want to marry,"*

One day, when she got home from school, she noticed strange people in the house. Chinara realized what was going on and went to her room, her eyes full of tears. She heard her father saying “yes, I agree.” When her mother asked, “What if Chinara does not agree?”, her father made it clear that nobody was asking her opinion.

The parents wanted Chinara to marry a man with a lot of money. The bridegroom was considered to be the wealthiest man in the village. He had 600 head of cattle, which was the main source of income for the family. “We cannot afford to buy things for you, but they will, you will have a lot of money” – Chinara’s father told her.

The engagement took place in Chinara’s house at the end of 2014. The 14-year-old girl dressed in black in protest. No one was listening to her. It’s traditional for the bride to be given gifts at the engagement party. She was given gold jewelry, clothes, and make-up. The wedding was planned for the following year, once Chinara had turned 15.

“I was so young,” says Chinara, who had even heard her neighbors say “She still plays with children. How on earth did they decide to marry the girl?”

Whenever she complained to her mom, she’d get the same answer, – “your father has decided and I can’t stand in his way.” Once her brother told her – “what can you do at home, isn’t it better to get married?!”

Chinara was reluctant to meet with her fiancé or even talk to him. One day, she overheard her older brother and mother talking – “since Chinara does not like the boy, he should kidnap her.”

Knowing about their plans, Chinara was cautious about spending time with the bridegroom. She wanted to make sure he didn’t have the opportunity to kidnap her. Once he offered to take her to the mountains, and as Chinara had never seen them she decided to go. It was already getting dark and they decided to go back, but she got lost. He hid from her, and then jumped out, telling her “if you do not come with me, I will leave you here.” Fearing being kidnapped, she refused, and so he left her on the mountain slope. Eventually, his relatives found Chinara and brought her home.

The next day, she told her parents everything. Her father blamed her for what had happened on the mountain, “he had probably wanted to talk to you, why did you make such a fuss?”

Chinara was terrified of her father and knew no matter what she said, he would force her to marry. She had no one in her family to turn to.

She turned to her teacher, who she felt had always listened to her. The teacher promised to help and called the police.

The police launched an investigation. When they spoke to Chinara, she denied everything. She was too scared to tell the truth.

Following the police involvement, the family postponed the wedding for several years, until she was of age. Her family kept up the pressure on Chinara to go through with the marriage, reminding her of what people would say if she broke off the engagement. She attempted suicide and was hospitalized, but her parents’ response remained the same, – “no matter what you do, you will still marry the boy!”

When Chinara turned 17, the wedding plans began in earnest. The wedding was scheduled for September 8, 2018. The families started preparing for the wedding, the invitations were printed, guests invited and the menu selected. The reception was going to cost a fortune, her father took out a loan to cover the cost.

“They couldn’t find the money for my education, but when it came to the wedding they found a way,” says Chinara bitterly.

Throughout the wedding preparations, Chinara couldn’t understand why no one asked her why she was crying. When the bridegroom’s family took her to buy furniture for their new home, Chinara decided to choose the most expensive items as a way to get revenge.

Several days before the wedding, Chinara contacted a well-known journalist she met in the mosque. The journalist appealed to the Public Defender for help, who immediately phoned Chinara and then they called the police. The police launched an investigation, summoning Chinara and her parents to the police station. Chinara told them everything and was taken to a shelter for victims of violence. Chinara’s father was arrested. He was found guilty by the court and sentenced to two years in prison.

Now Chinara had the opportunity to define her own future. Her sister's husband promised to help her with her studies, that he wouldn't force her to marry. She thought about going home but realized she wanted more from life. *"I realized that if I went back home, it would mean getting married, raising children, doing housework, and serving my husband just like my mom had done. It would mean becoming dependent on someone else."*

"I absolutely love my current life. This is where I am happy."

Chinara now feels empowered to speak up for herself and fight for her rights. She wants everyone to understand the importance of listening to their children and caring about their happiness. She urges the state to enforce the laws against child and forced marriage, and make sure girls know that support is available to them. "I could have never imagined that there were so many things to support girls like me,"

It's been three years since Chinara escaped being forced to marry as a child. She is actively involved in anti-child marriage campaigns across Georgia. By telling her story and raising her voice she hopes to encourage others to live freely.

Goga Khatiashvili

Goga Khatiashvili is a lawyer and human rights expert from Georgia. He holds a Master's degree in Law.

Goga began his career as a criminal analyst at the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, where he worked for three years. He went on to work at the Department of Human Rights Protection and Investigation Quality Monitoring at the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, first as a Chief Inspector and then as the Head of the Human Rights Division. During his nearly three years at the Ministry, Goga oversaw a number of cases of violence against women and child marriage, coordinating effective investigative measures and referral of victims to relevant services. During his time at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Goga was involved in the development and implementation of a number of mechanisms to protect women and victims of domestic violence. In addition, he worked on legislative changes and a number of recommendations for law enforcement aimed at addressing the crimes of violence against women and child abuse.

Goga is the author of a number of studies, court monitoring reports, articles, and other publications on criminal justice and domestic violence. He actively participates in information campaigns and awareness-raising activities on these issues, holding meetings with communities to discuss child marriage, its negative consequences, and penalties provided by the law in Georgia.

Ending child, early and forced marriage through the law

This is a 21st-century story of a girl who successfully managed to escape the forced marriage.

I was working for the Ministry of Internal Affairs, when at the end of August 2018, we received information from the Public Defender's Office about a forced marriage that was about to take place. 17-year-old Chinara Kojaeva's father was about to force her to marry a man against her will. This wasn't the first time, it seemed he'd also tried to force her to marry in 2016, but that wedding had been canceled. With just a few days until the wedding, we had very little time to act. My co-workers and I decided to travel to Tetrtskaro to meet the girl in person and protect her rights.

We got in touch with Chinara's teacher, who the girl had first turned to for help, and with the teacher's help, we were able to contact the child.

The next day my colleagues and I drove to Tetrtskaro. We discussed how to communicate with the girl so that we could gain her trust and stop her from being married against her will. When we got to the police station, Chinara and her parents were waiting for us. We asked the parents to leave, so that we could speak to her in private.

In the conversation with Chinara, it was obvious she was under pressure from her parents and needed somebody to confide in. She confirmed that her father was pushing her into marriage. She told us that her father had tried to force her to marry in 2016, but then, after police involvement, he'd promised not to marry her off until she reached adulthood. He'd broken that promise and was again trying to force her to marry a man much older than her. She also noted that she'd only met the man a few times, and she did not like him at all.



As we were talking to Chinara, a crowd began to gather outside the police station, Chinara's husband-to-be was amongst them. No one could understand why the police were trying to interfere in their lives. Several times Chinara's mother tried to enter the police building, demanding to see her daughter. Her mother's screams startled Chinara, she told me she was scared something would happen to her mom.

It seemed that Chinara's parents were more worried about what people would think of their daughter, than their daughter's wishes and well-being.

It was getting dark, and Chinara's mother was still trying to break into the police building to see her child. There was a risk that if the two met each other, Chinara would retract the statement she'd made against her father. It was decided to take the girl out of the back door of the police building secretly.

For her safety, we arranged to take Chinara to a shelter.

Despite her relatives' attempts to persuade Chinara to abandon the court proceedings and return home, Chinara's father was found guilty of the incitement of his daughter to early marriage. He was sentenced to two years in prison.

Most importantly, the unwanted wedding was finally cancelled.

Chinara Kojaeva's clearly demonstrates the pervasive influence of social, economic and cultural norms that promote child marriage. To defend her rights, Chinara used her most powerful weapon - her voice. She demonstrated great courage and became one of the first girls to confront her own family and community. In doing so, she set an example for many young women, beginning a national conversation about forced and early marriage.

About Equality Now

Founded in 1992, Equality Now is an international human rights organization that works to protect and promote the rights of all women and girls around the world. Our campaigns are centered on four program areas: Legal Equality, End Sexual Violence, End Harmful Practices, and End Sex Trafficking, with a cross-cutting focus on the unique needs of adolescent girls.

Equality Now combines grassroots activism with international, regional, and national legal advocacy to achieve legal and systemic change to benefit all women and girls, and works to ensure that governments enact and enforce laws and policies that uphold their rights.

As a global organization, Equality Now has offices in the Americas (New York), Africa (Nairobi), Europe (London), and MENA (Beirut) and with a presence in Amman, Jordan, New Delhi, India, Tbilisi, Georgia, and partners and members all around the world.

For more information:

 equalitynow.org

 [@equalitynoworg](https://www.facebook.com/equalitynoworg)

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

 [@equalitynow](https://www.linkedin.com/company/equalitynow)

 [@equalitynow](https://twitter.com/equalitynow)

The following organizations provide legal support to survivors:

Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA)

Tbilisi, Uznadze st. 101

Tel: 032 299 50 76

Email: legalaid@gyla.ge

Website: www.gyla.ge

Union Sapari

Tbilisi, Akaki Gakhokidze Street 11a

Tel: 032 230 76 03

Email: unionsapari@gmail.com

Website: www.sapari.ge

Rights Georgia (formerly “Article 42 of the Constitution”)

Tbilisi, Akaki Gakhokidze Street 11a

Tel: 032 299 88 56

Email: office@rights.ge

Website: www.rights.ge

Human Rights Center

Tbilisi, A. Gakhokidze Street 11a (former Gagarin 2 lane), III floor

Tel: (+995 32) 2 38 46 48

Email: hridc@hridc.org

Website: www.hridc.org

Partnership for Human Rights (PHR)

Tbilisi, Aleksidze 1, building 2, apartment 26

Tel: 032 233 13 56

Email: info@phr.ge

Website: www.phr.ge

Getting support in Georgia:

If you, or someone you know, have been affected by child marriage or domestic abuse, the following Georgian organizations and government services may be able to help.

IF YOU ARE IN IMMEDIATE DANGER, YOU SHOULD CALL THE POLICE ON 112.

SAFE YOU - app to protect women and girls from violence.

A virtual safe space for women.

Download the app to your cell-phone:

Android: <https://bit.ly/318nSsl>

iOS: <https://apple.co/2Z7s3Cq>



24-Hour Violence Hotline: Dial **116 006** for consultations in eight languages, (Georgian, English, Russian, Turkish, Azerbaijani, Armenian, Arabic & Persian. Lines are open 24 hours a day.

Children's Rights Hotline: Dial 111 to report or discuss issues relating to children's rights. Lines are open 10:00 to 19:00 on weekdays.

Public Defender's Office: Dial 14 81.