



BREAKING THE SILENCE

Voices of Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
A Collection of True Testimonies from Women and Girls in Tanzania



"The hardest part was not the violence —
it was being told to stay silent."





CONTENT ADVISORY

This book contains accounts of sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation.

Some of the stories shared within these pages may be distressing or triggering for certain readers. We encourage you to prioritize your well-being while engaging with this material. Please feel free to pause, seek professional support, or stop reading if you find the content overwhelming.

ETHICAL NOTICE & SURVIVOR PROTECTION

All testimonies in this book are real. Names are pseudonymized, locations are generalised, and identifying details have been changed to protect survivors.

Stories are presented with informed consent and without alteration of meaning.

The purpose of this book is documentation, awareness, and advocacy — not sensationalism.



WOMEN ACTION TOWARDS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (WATED)

Kigamboni and Kisarawe kola village,
P.O. Box 3710, Dar es Salaam,
Tanzania

+255 745 950 950
info@wated.or.tz
www.wated.or.tz





WHY THIS BOOK EXISTS

This book exists because many stories of sexual and gender-based violence are never heard, believed, or recorded in ways that honor the people who lived them. Too often, survivors’ voices are filtered, summarized, softened, or reshaped to fit reports, statistics, or headlines. In doing so, the truth of their experiences is lost.

BREAKING THE SILENCE was created to do something different.

The intention of this book is simple and deliberate: to listen and to take action to end violence.

The stories you are about to read are shared in the survivors’ own voices, as they were told. They have not been rewritten to sound dramatic, inspirational, or palatable. They have not been edited to protect systems, institutions, or social comfort. Where changes were made, they were only to protect identities — never to change meaning.

We did not rewrite these stories.
We listened.

By centering survivor voices, this book resists judgment, blame, and simplification. It does not ask readers to decide who is “right” or “wrong.” It asks readers to witness, to sit with discomfort, and to recognize the human cost of silence, power, and neglect.

This book is not meant to shock.
It is meant to be honest.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

This is not a book to rush through.

Read slowly.
Pause when you need to.
Return to it when you are ready.

Some stories may feel familiar. Others may feel deeply uncomfortable. Do not skip a story simply because it is hard to read. Discomfort is often where understanding begins.

These stories are not statistics.
They are not case studies.
They are not lessons wrapped in conclusions.

Each story stands on its own, shaped by a specific life, context, and moment in time. There is no single narrative of survival, no universal response to violence, and no correct way to endure harm.

For policymakers, practitioners, and leaders: listen before responding. Respond without judging.

For community members and general readers: resist the urge to judge or compare. These stories are not asking for approval — they are asking to be heard.

If at any point this book brings up difficult emotions or memories, take care of yourself. Stepping away is not weakness. It is awareness.

This book does not ask you to fix everything.
It asks you not to look away.





SEXUAL VIOLENCE DISGUISED AS TRADITION



- Angel (pseudonym).
- I am 71 years old.
- I studied up to Form Four.
- I live in Tanga. I am a domestic worker.

I was married, but later separated from my first husband. I am a mother of twelve children, although four of them have passed away. To support myself, I do various kinds of work such as washing clothes, farming, and clearing land. Despite all the work I do, if you see me, you will notice that I still try to look neat. At home, I live with one of my children. Another child is receiving treatment at Muhimbili Hospital with support from her sisters, who also live in Dar es Salaam. I also help care for my grandchildren because their father passed away. Even with my limited income, I try to give them 3,000 Tanzanian shillings each day so they can go to

school.

In 1989, after separating from my first husband, I married again. However, I did not stay long with my second husband because he passed away. In our Muslim tradition, when a husband dies, the widow observes a mourning period known as eda. After that period, I was supposed to be inherited by another man in the family. I refused, but was told that according to tradition, a widow must be inherited. Otherwise, she could suffer serious health consequences called Kitigo, which could only be prevented by undergoing a widow cleansing ritual.

When I asked what Kitigo meant, they told me it was an illness that could affect a woman who refused inheritance. They said she could become paralyzed in the back or waist and lose the ability to walk. They also explained how the widow cleansing ritual was performed. A man who neither knows you nor is known by you would be found and paid. Two pieces of kitenge cloth would be purchased and taken into the forest. The woman would go there first, wearing one piece of kitenge cloth while the other was spread on the ground. She would then wait for the man to arrive so they could have sexual intercourse. The act would happen in darkness so that she would not see who the man was. When finished, each person would leave separately and go their own way.

They also told me that Kitigo was like a generational curse. If the ritual was not performed, even after the woman died, anyone who touched her clothes could be affected by the same misfortune. They said that because of this, her children might not inherit her belongings. If she owned boxes of clothing, everything would need to be burned or thrown away.

Under that kind of pressure, I felt I had no strength left to refuse. I had already refused widow inheritance, and now people were warning me that my family would face misfortune, and my children might lose their inheritance. In the end, they forced me to accept undergoing the widow cleansing ritual that could prevent Kitigo.

After that, I tried to continue with my life. I completed the forty days of mourning and returned to my daily activities to earn a living. But after about six months, I began to notice changes in my health. I started losing weight. I developed a persistent cough and frequent fevers, and my strength began to fade. I did not understand what was happening to me. Among my children, there was one daughter I trusted with my secret.

I told her how I had been feeling and everything that had happened. After listening to me, she said, “Mother, do not worry.” The next morning, we went together to the hospital. When I arrived, I explained that I wanted to check my health because I had been having frequent fevers, losing weight, and feeling weak.

They tested me for HIV. The health workers asked me, “Mother, if we tell you that you do not have the infection, what will you do?” I said, “I will thank God.” Then they asked, “And if we tell you that you do have the infection?” I hesitated for a moment. My daughter encouraged me, saying, “Mother, answer them.” I replied, “I will still thank God. Perhaps this is my destiny, and if there is medicine, I will take it.”

They asked me to step outside for a moment. When I left the room, I felt confused and lost. I was walking around the hospital, not knowing what to do. A man saw me and asked, “Madam, what is wrong? Why do you look so troubled?” At that moment, my daughter came out and told me that the results showed I was infected with HIV. We went back inside, where I received counseling. They encouraged me and gave me hope, urging me to start treatment. I agreed and began taking medication.

While I was receiving treatment, I stayed with my half-sister. But even there, I faced another painful form of abuse, stigma, and discrimination. My sister separated my cup, my plate, and my food from the rest of the family. When it was time to eat, she placed food on a plate and pushed it toward me with a stick. I cried many times because of that humiliation. When my daughter was present, she was asked to bring the food to me.

At that time, I also used herbal medicine because hospital drugs were not easily available. Later, my condition worsened. I became very ill and was taken to the intensive care unit because my immune system had dropped dangerously. It was then that I started antiretroviral treatment after the medicines became available. Since that time, I have continued taking the medication, and today I am doing well. If you look at me now, you won’t easily know what I have been through.

Even today, widow cleansing still exists in several areas of Tanga, such as Mombo, Lushoto, Bumbuli, and Mlalo. Many communities continue to follow these traditions, and women are still forced either to be inherited or to undergo the widow cleansing ritual.

Later, when my family realized that I had been infected because of what they forced me to do in the forest, they deeply regretted it. But the damage had already been done. The experience left me with deep psychological pain. To this day, I have never had another sexual relationship with a man. Whenever I see men, I feel as if they are all the same people who cause harm to women.

My message to society and the government is that this practice must be completely stopped.

**WIDOW CLEANSING IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE
DISGUISED AS TRADITION; AN INJUSTICE
HIDDEN BEHIND THE NAME OF CULTURE.**

It is a form of abuse that people rarely report because it is normalized by society and kept as a family secret. But the result of that silence is lasting pain that leaves women with severe physical and psychological consequences. People must be educated about how to report violence. Although the government and some organizations have begun to challenge this practice, the wall of silence remains strong. Many people are afraid of shame, and that shame continues to bury the truth and allows violence to persist in the shadows.

**SOCIETY MUST UNDERSTAND THAT NOT
EVERYTHING CALLED TRADITION IS
SAFE.**

Some traditions are forms of violence. When violence is dressed in the clothing of culture, its consequences become devastating, not only for women, but also for their children and for the entire community.





ON THE ROAD ALONE



- Merina (pseudonym).
- I am 24 years old.
- I studied up to Form Four.
- I currently live in Dar es Salaam. I am a domestic worker.

I was born and raised in Morogoro Region under the care of my parents. That is where I attended both primary and secondary school until I completed Form Four. My childhood and early youth were normal, like those of many other girls. I have never been married. At one point in my life, I faced a serious health challenge. A swelling began in my left arm and later spread toward my shoulder. Because of this condition, I started having problems with my arm and leg. My parents struggled to take me to different hospitals in search of treatment. I underwent many medical tests, but the illness could not be identified. Later, they also tried taking me to

traditional healers.

After several treatments, the condition improved a little, but even today, I still have difficulties with my limbs, especially my arm. My wrist and fingers cannot turn or straighten properly.

I remember that in 2020, a young man had been persistently pursuing me. He tried many times to convince me to have a romantic relationship with him, but he never succeeded because I always refused.

One day, my aunt had a family gathering and invited me to attend. I informed my parents and then went to the event. Everything went well until nighttime, and eventually, I prepared to return home. At around seven in the evening, I said goodbye to my aunt and started walking back. The distance from my aunt's house to our home was quite short, so I was walking alone.

On my way, I met the same young man who had been after me years ago. At that moment, it was just the two of us on the road. He began disturbing me and blocked my way so I could not pass. Suddenly, he grabbed my arm forcefully. I could not fight him, and there was no one nearby who could help me.

BECAUSE OF MY PHYSICAL CONDITION, I WAS UNABLE TO DEFEND MYSELF. HE DRAGGED ME VIOLENTLY INTO A BUSHY AREA NEAR THE ROAD. HE ASSAULTED ME AND FORCED HIMSELF ON ME.

After committing the act, he ran away and left me there. I tried to compose myself as best as I could and then returned home. The young man was not originally from our village. I had only heard his name before and had seen him around, but I had never paid close attention to him. It wasn't until that day that I was able to see his face clearly. When I reached home, I told my parents what had happened.

They immediately acted and reported the incident to the police so that the young man could be dealt with according to the law. Later, we also heard from other people that he had a reputation for ruining the lives of young girls. However, I had never imagined that I would encounter him in such a terrifying situation one day.



After that incident, my life changed completely. It was discovered that I had become pregnant as a result of the assault. My mother was the first person I told about the pregnancy. I felt it was not right to hide such a matter from my parents. My mother then informed my father. My father is a very respected man in our community and a senior religious leader. What had happened could have brought great embarrassment to him within the community. However, despite that, my parents did not blame me or accuse me. Instead, they stood by me and protected me.

Together with the police, they tried to find the young man responsible. Investigations were carried out, but he was never found. After some time, we had no choice but to stop pursuing the case. Because of that situation and the environment in the village, our family decided to relocate and move to Dar es Salaam.

I went to the hospital and was received well by the health workers. At that time, I considered terminating the pregnancy. However, my parents advised me not to do so. They told me that perhaps God had allowed the child to come into my life for a special reason. They assured me that they would help raise and care for the child. With their support, I decided to continue with the pregnancy. At the hospital, they carried out several medical tests, and I thank God that I did not test positive for HIV.

To this day, I remain deeply grateful to my parents for supporting me during that difficult period. They helped raise my child and continue to support me. For now, I still dream of becoming independent. Back in our village, we have my father's farm, and the crop I love to grow is tomatoes. My biggest challenge is the lack of capital to buy seeds, pesticides, and irrigation pipes. I believe that if I could receive assistance with these farming inputs, I would be able to cultivate the land and become self-reliant.

MY MESSAGE TO OTHERS IS THAT PEOPLE SHOULD NOT LOSE HOPE WHEN THEY EXPERIENCE VIOLENCE LIKE THIS. THEY SHOULD FIGHT FOR THEMSELVES,

SEEK HELP, AND REPORT SUCH INCIDENTS EARLY SO THAT THOSE RESPONSIBLE CAN BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE.

Parents also need to protect and guide their children. Children require safe environments and proper care.

To my fellow girls, it is important to be cautious and seek help quickly whenever you face danger. Society as a whole must also take responsibility to protect girls and women from violence. As for me, I still have great hope for a better future. I believe that one day I will become fully independent through the farming work that I love.





WHEN WORK BECOMES A TRAP



- Janeth (pseudonym).
- I am 30 years old.
- I studied up to Standard Six.
- I am from Dodoma. I am a domestic worker.

I was very young when I started working, and I didn't get the chance to continue with school because of the difficult situation at home. I was entering grade six when I dropped out and started looking for work to help my grandmother, who had raised me during my childhood. When I was twelve years old, a woman took me from home and told me to do domestic work in Arusha. I was very young and didn't know much about the world outside. We arrived at the area where I began working at the home of a woman who worked in the coffee plantations. My job was to carry out regular household chores. Her children were away at boarding school, so I was often home alone.

After a short time, her younger brother graduated from college and came to live with his sister. I looked up to him as a brother because I was young, and I gave him the respect a brother deserves. He used to call me to bring him tea or prepare food. I did these tasks with humility and respect, as a domestic worker should.

One day, his sister traveled for work and left her brother and me at home. That day, I brought him tea as usual. After drinking it, he said to me, "Come and sit here." I was afraid. I wondered why he was calling me to sit on the couch. But I told myself to listen to him. When I sat down, he got up and came close to me. He began touching me while telling me, "You are a beautiful girl." I started to get very scared. I wondered what he meant and why this brother I respected was touching me like that.

SUDDENLY, HE PULLED ME WITH FORCE, COVERED MY MOUTH, AND TOOK ME INTO HIS BEDROOM. THAT IS WHERE HE RAPED ME.

At that time, I knew nothing about these things. I saw blood, and I was in sharp pain.

I was still so young that even my period hadn't started yet. After doing this to me, he told me, "If you tell anyone, I will kill you." I just found myself crying. I felt like my virginity was destroyed. The fear he put in me made it impossible for me to tell anyone. I was afraid that even if I told his sister, I would look like a liar. After that incident, he continued to do these things to me repeatedly. Every time his sister was away from the house, he treated me like his wife.

His sister began to notice that I had changed. She asked me why I was so lost in thought, or if I missed home. But I told her no because I was afraid to tell the truth. I didn't have any money because I didn't know how to save it. I always sent it to my grandmother, who had raised me.

I stayed at that job for three months, and during that entire period, he continued to abuse me. Eventually, I found the courage to tell his sister. I told her that her brother had been doing these things to me. But she didn't believe me. She said I was making up stories about her brother. After that, I asked them to give me fare so I could go home.



When I returned home, I didn't know I was carrying a pregnancy because my period had still not started. After some time,

IT BECAME CLEAR THAT I WAS PREGNANT. I WAS TWELVE YEARS OLD, AND I GAVE BIRTH WHEN I WAS THIRTEEN.

This situation caused me great pain because I loved to learn. Many times, I would think about how I might find a sponsor to go back to school. But how do I go back to school when I am already pregnant?

That pregnancy was very difficult. During delivery, I faced major complications and almost had to have surgery because the birth canal wouldn't open. I lost a lot of blood and stayed in the hospital for a long time as doctors fought to save my life.

I remember on the day I gave birth, I almost delivered the baby alone. The nurses had stepped away for a while, and my grandmother was outside. I gave birth there while crying, with only God and me, and then they came to cut the umbilical cord.

After giving birth, life was very hard. I was still a child but already a mother. I was forced to do small jobs to raise my child. I fetched water from the well or the ravine, or I sold things at the market. I left the child with my grandmother, ran to work, and then came back to breastfeed him. Because I was still young, other people tried to cheat me even in the small tasks I did.

Some people said terrible things, calling me a prostitute because I had a child at a young age. Those words hurt me deeply, but I had to endure and keep struggling for my life.

After that incident, I began to hate men. Some would hit on me even when they saw me breastfeeding my child, but I rejected them. They would say I was conceited, but they didn't know the pain I was carrying.

Many times, I would go inside and cry alone. I told my grandmother that my life was ruined. At first, my grandmother blamed me, but I told her clearly that I had been raped.

Later, she understood and believed me. In truth, I didn't get much help. It was just my grandmother and me struggling through life.

That event completely changed the direction of my life. They told me I was going to work and perhaps get back to school, but what I ended up with was a pregnancy and a hard life. However, that pain has made me a fighter against gender-based violence.

I do not want to see anyone else mistreated the way I was. Even if I couldn't study much, I strive to help others who encounter violence. To young girls, I would like to say: do not be deceived easily into going to work far away without protection or supervision. Often, those places can have many dangers for young girls.

SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE MUST RECEIVE HELP AND JUSTICE WHEN THEY REPORT THE INCIDENTS THAT HAPPENED TO THEM.

I desire to see the voices of women, girls, and children heard more so that violent incidents decrease in our community.





WHEN HOME IS NOT SAFE



- Chioma (pseudonym).
- I am 35 years old.
- I studied up to Form Two.
- I live in Dar es Salaam. I am a domestic worker.

I was only three years old when I began living in my grandmother's care. My mother worked and often returned very late at night, so she was unable to raise us herself all the time. That is why I spent most of my childhood living with my grandmother.

Life with my grandmother was not easy for me. She was very harsh and beat me many times. As these events continued, I began to feel that my grandmother did not love me and that one day she might hurt me even more. That was when I told my mother that I did not want to continue living with my grandmother, and I wished to live with her.

For my mother, life was also not easy. Her work caused her to return home very late at night, and she lived alone. It was difficult for her to leave me to sleep by myself at night while she was at work. That is when she decided to take me to her neighbor so that I could eat and then sleep there every night when my mother was at work. At that neighbor's place, I used to sleep with older girls who were the children of the house owner.

ONE DAY, WHILE I WAS SLEEPING, THOSE GIRLS BEGAN TOUCHING MY PRIVATE PARTS. I DID NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY WERE DOING BECAUSE I WAS STILL VERY YOUNG.

They gave me comforting words, saying that it wasn't a bad thing, just a game. But they began to insert their fingers into my private parts. I felt a very sharp pain.

When I screamed, they told me to be quiet because that was going to be my life. Later, they did not stop at using fingers.

They began inserting objects of different sizes. They did these acts to me for a long time until they saw that they could start taking me to men.

There was a day when I went to sleep there and found a man inside the house. Those girls left me with that man.

He committed sexual violence against me. By then, it was no longer a surprise to me because they had already accustomed me to that abuse for a long time. I never told my mother what was going on.

After some time, my mother moved from that house, and that is when I got a little relief. After moving, my mother decided to start her own business so she could provide for us, her children. She was selling illegal local brew, which had many challenges.

There were challenges of being arrested by the police, problems with customers, and mistreatment from the community. Later, after seeing that life was becoming difficult, my mother decided to marry an older man so he could help care for us. At first, life began to become better. There was relief at home. But later,

THAT STEPFATHER BEGAN A HABIT OF TOUCHING MY BUTTOCKS, WAIST, AND CHEST. IT WAS A SITUATION I DID NOT LIKE AT ALL.

When I told my mother, she called him and asked him about that behavior. But he replied that in his culture, a father touching his child is a normal thing, and that he had no bad intentions. Mother told him that we are her daughters and we do not like that kind of life.

After I told my mother the truth, that man was very angry. From then on, he began to mistreat me even more. At night, he woke me up frequently and asked me to bring him cigarettes, a matchbox, or a urine container. Sometimes he sat and urinated in front of me while showing me his private parts. He did very strange things to me.

By that time, my mother was no longer on my side; she was on her husband's side. When I got tired of that mistreatment, one day I confronted that man with harsh words and told him clearly that he wanted me sexually. When I was 14 years old, I decided to leave my mother's house and live with my aunt.

But even there, I did not have a life of peace. At my aunt's place, there was also mistreatment. I endured it because I wanted to continue with school. Later, my aunt began to sell me to men by taking money from them. Men came home and told her they wanted a woman.

My aunt forced me to leave with them to guest houses, where I was subjected to acts of sexual violence. It was like a business my aunt did using my life, and she made sure my mother knew nothing of what was happening to me.

Life continued that way until I was in Form Two. That was when a young man appeared who showed he cared for me and loved me. I felt he was the first person to show me true love in my life.

I entered a relationship with him, and at 15 years old, I got pregnant with my first child. After that, the young man ran away from me, and I went through even greater mistreatment from my aunt until I had to run away and go to the streets. There was another young man who had wanted me for a long time; I had to accept him and live at his place. But even there, life was not peaceful. He mistreated me a lot. Even after giving birth, he continued to abuse me and wanted to penetrate me even while I was still nursing.

When asked about that behavior, he said I had been a prostitute a long time. When the mistreatment increased, I decided to return to my mother. But when I arrived, my mother's husband did not like us being there. He decided to chase me, my mother, and my younger siblings away. That night, we asked a neighbor for shelter and slept there.

From then on, my life changed and became even more struggling. I was still a young girl, already with a child, and I had to look for work to support myself and raise my child. During that period, I was unable to share with anyone else except my mother. Many people I wanted to tell were blaming me instead of seeing that I was a small child and unable to defend myself against adults who were using me badly.

Regardless of what I went through, I thank God that I have never been infected with HIV. My mother stood by me several times when I needed her; that was my support. I also received support from organizations like ANGAZA and WAJIKI, which provided me with training and helped me with some things. Today I have three children, and I am responsible for caring for them every day. That is why I wish to get help with starting a business so that I can be self-reliant and provide for my family.

My message is that the violence that happens to a child can change their whole life.

WHEN A CHILD IS IN THE HANDS OF PEOPLE WHO WERE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT THEM, BUT INSTEAD, THEY MISTREAT THEM, THE SCARS REMAIN FOR A VERY LONG TIME.

I wish to start my life anew, be self-reliant, and raise my children in a safer environment than the one I found myself in.





JUSTICE FOR YOUNG MOTHER



- Catalina (pseudonym).
- I am 19 years old.
- I studied up to Standard Seven.
- I am from Dodoma. I am a domestic worker.

My life today may look normal, but it carries a story that changed everything while I was still very young. Shortly after finishing primary school, when I could not continue my education, I became pregnant. From that point, my life took a completely different direction.

There was a young man whom I considered my boyfriend. We lived in the same village, and for some time, we would talk and meet like other young people in relationships. He promised to marry me, and because of that promise, I trusted him deeply. At that age, I believed his words were true and saw him as someone I could build a future with.

One day, he called me and asked me to go to his house. It was my first time going there, and we had never met in a private place before. When I arrived, things changed suddenly. He forced me to have sex with him, even though I did not expect it. He used force, and I was unable to stop him.

After that incident, I became pregnant. When I discovered this, I was in great shock. I was not ready to become a mother at such a young age, and I felt fear and confusion about what would happen next.

When I told him about the pregnancy, he refused to be involved. He denied that it was his and did not want to take any responsibility. My parents advised me to leave him and begin focusing on my life and the child I was carrying.

At that time, I found myself in a very difficult situation, as I was still young and dependent on my family.

Despite everything, I did not report the incident to anyone. I did not even tell my mother that he had forced me. I remained silent because I felt ashamed and did not know where to seek help or who would understand me.

However, I went to his father to ask for assistance. He said he would speak to him, but he also explained that his son was harsh and difficult to convince to take responsibility.

Later, I gave birth to my child. The father only provided support for a short time, until the baby was two months old. After that, he stopped coming and withdrew all support. Since then, I have been raising my child with the help of my family.

My parents continue to support me as much as they can. My mother knows who the father is, although I never shared the full details of what happened. My father also cares for the child as a grandfather.

To this day, I have no communication with the child's father, and we have no plans of being together in the future.

ALTHOUGH HE NEVER THREATENED ME INTO SILENCE, MY YOUNG AGE AND LACK OF KNOWLEDGE PREVENTED ME FROM SEEKING HELP OR TAKING ACTION.

I have also never received any professional counseling support.

Life as a young mother is not easy, but I do my best to ensure that my child grows up in a safe environment. To other girls, I would say: do not be easily deceived. Not everyone who says they love you or promises marriage has good intentions. It is important to think about your future before making big decisions.

I REQUEST THAT THE COMMUNITY SUPPORT SURVIVORS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, ESPECIALLY YOUNG GIRLS WHO OFTEN FACE SUCH SITUATIONS WITHOUT HELP. THOSE WHO COMMIT SUCH ACTS SHOULD BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE ACCORDING TO THE LAW.

I am ready to cooperate with authorities so that justice can be served. What I desire most is for the father of my child to take responsibility. I would also like to receive psychological support so that I can continue rebuilding my life.





SETTLING FATHER'S DEBT



- Bimoza (pseudonym).
- I am 17 years old.
- I studied up to Standard Six.
- I am from Dodoma.

I was living with my mother until one day my father came to take me. He told me he was taking me to his home so that I could continue with school. I trusted him because he is my father, and I believed I would have the chance to continue my education, so I went with him without hesitation.

My father lived in a village called Mkondani. When we arrived, I stayed there for about a week. After that, he told me we would go to another village called Babayu. As we traveled, he told me that he was transferring me to a new school. I believed him, but when we arrived, I realized that things were not as he had said.

Instead of taking me to school, he took me to a man I had never seen before and told me I was to be married to him. I was shocked. I told my father clearly that I did not want to be married.

I was still young and was preparing to enter grade seven, with dreams of continuing my education. But my father did not listen. He told me that if I returned home, he would no longer recognize me. He also threatened to harm my mother. Out of fear for her safety, I remained silent.

It was in November that my life changed completely. My father forced me into that marriage, and I felt as if my dreams had been taken away without my consent. When I arrived at the man's home, he received me as if everything had already been arranged.

His parents also accepted me without question. I realized that my father had already discussed everything with them. I tried once more to tell my father that I didn't want this, but he left me there and went away.

I did not run away because I didn't know the area, and I had no money to return home. I had been left there with no support.

ON THE FIRST DAY, NOTHING HAPPENED. BUT ON THE SECOND DAY, THE MAN CAME AND FORCED HIMSELF ON ME.

I was afraid and had no one to help me. Even when I told him my age, he said he did not care.

Later, I learned that my father had already received money from him, eight hundred thousand shillings (TZS 800,000). That is when I understood that I had been taken there to settle a debt.

After some time, I got a chance to call my mother using a neighbor's phone, and I told her everything. She reported the matter to the village chairman, but before any action could be taken, my father disappeared. After that, my mother separated from him.

Eventually, my sister helped me escape. I left with nothing except the clothes I was wearing.

By that time, I was already pregnant. I now live with my aunt, who is not a direct blood relative but the wife of my uncle. Life there is also difficult. My aunt struggles herself, and there is little support for me during this pregnancy.

My sister helps where she can by selling vegetables, but her means are limited. My brothers have not been involved in my situation.

When I think about what my father did, I feel deep pain. At times, I feel overwhelmed by my situation and the loss of my education. I am still very young and now facing motherhood without support. When I went to the clinic, they told me to come with my husband to receive a clinic card.

When I explained that I did not have one, they turned me away. It was only after my sister pleaded with the health workers that they finally assisted me.

MY PREGNANCY IS NOW FIVE MONTHS ALONG. I WORRY ABOUT HOW I WILL MANAGE DELIVERY AND WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS FOR ME AND MY CHILD.

Despite everything, I still try to hold on to hope that my life can change. I believe that people who commit such acts should face legal consequences. Even my father should be held accountable for what he did to me.

IF GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY, I AM READY TO REPORT THE INCIDENT SO THAT JUSTICE CAN BE SERVED.

For now, I am trying to endure my situation and move forward with my life.





MEN IN THE ALLEY



- Careen (pseudonym).
- I am 22 years old.
- I studied up to Form Four.
- I am from Dodoma. I work as a cook.

Currently, I live with my maternal grandmother because both of my parents have passed away. I am not married, but I have one child. To earn a living, I help an elderly woman cook food at the market on Fridays. On other days, I sell roasted peanuts to support myself.

The event that changed my life happened in September last year. At that time, I had moved from Kigwe to Dodoma town to work as a domestic worker for an elderly woman. One day, she sent me to the shop to buy supplies for guests who had come to the house. There was a queue, and by the time I was returning, it was already around 8 p.m. As I walked back, I passed through a narrow alley where I met two men. They asked where I was coming from,

and I told them I had been to the shop. They then asked how much money I had, and when I said I had nothing, they started beating me.

ONE OF THEM RAPED ME. WHEN I TRIED TO SCREAM, THE OTHER COVERED MY MOUTH WITH A CLOTH AND RESTRAINED ME. AFTER THE FIRST ONE FINISHED, THE SECOND ONE ALSO RAPED ME.

When they were done, they ran away and left me there. I cried for help, but no one came. In that area, people are afraid to respond at night because they fear becoming victims themselves.

After the incident, I stayed silent. I was afraid of being questioned about who did it, yet I could not clearly identify them.

I returned home late, and my employer scolded me. I told her there had been a long queue. After preparing food for the guests, I went to my room without eating.

After some time, I began to feel unwell, so I returned to my grandmother's home in Kigwe. My condition worsened, and they took me to the hospital, where I was found to be pregnant and infected with sexually transmitted diseases. I received treatment for the infections, and the pregnancy continued.

Later, I gave birth to my child. It was only afterward that I heard similar attacks had happened in that same alley, and that someone had even lost their life there. I kept quiet until my grandmother asked me what was wrong, and I finally told her everything.

THE INCIDENT LEFT ME WITH DEEP EMOTIONAL PAIN. I EXPERIENCED STRESS AND WOULD OFTEN ISOLATE MYSELF AND CRY WHEN I REMEMBERED WHAT HAD HAPPENED.

I also had to leave my job in Dodoma. The support I received came from my uncle, who helped me access medical care.

After that, I began attending clinic services, which are provided freely for pregnant women. Even so, life has not been easy. Some members of the community spoke negatively, saying the child's father is unknown.

However, my family understood that what happened was not my fault.

I did not report the case to the police because I feared I would be required to identify the perpetrators, which I could not do clearly. I only remember that one was heavily built and the other was tall and thin.

After giving birth, I developed complications. The stitches I received at the hospital opened, and I had to return for further treatment. Even now, the wound has not fully healed, and I sometimes experience involuntary fluid flow.

I was referred to a higher-level hospital for specialized treatment, but I have not been able to go due to the cost. It has now been four months, and I am still not well.

THE SUPPORT I NEED MOST IS PROPER MEDICAL CARE SO THAT I CAN FULLY RECOVER. I ALSO BELIEVE THAT SERVICES FOR SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE SHOULD BE IMPROVED, AS MANY PEOPLE DO NOT RECEIVE ADEQUATE TREATMENT DESPITE SERIOUS INJURIES.

I appeal to employers to treat their workers with care and understanding, because fear can prevent workers from speaking about the challenges they face. Parents should also follow up on the well-being of their children when they are working away from home.

I ask the community to stop judging women who go through such experiences and instead offer support. Authorities should ensure that cases of gender-based violence are followed up on quickly so that such acts can be prevented. I encourage other survivors to speak out so they can receive help. For my part, I would like to receive psychological support to help me heal and rebuild my life.





ABUSE BY A TEACHER



- Isabella (pseudonym).
- I am 18 years old.
- I studied up to Form One.
- I live in Dodoma. I am a domestic worker.

I lived with my mother, and I had big dreams of studying just like other children. I was doing well with my studies until my life changed when I was still very young. When I was in primary school in grade four, there was a headteacher who had a habit of forcing female students into sexual relationships.

He wanted me frequently, but I kept refusing him because I did not understand those things at all, and I only wanted to continue with my studies as usual. When I reached grade seven, the situation became even worse. During that period, we were preparing for the national examination through what we called “camps.” These camps were not like boarding schools. Instead, we students stayed at school and slept in the same classrooms where we studied.

There were no beds; we slept on mats. Some classrooms had doors, but others had none at all. We had to contribute our own maize and beans to get food.

There were no partitions for privacy between boys and girls, and the toilets were the same ones used by the entire school, often very dirty.

There was also not enough water; sometimes we were forced to fetch water from far away from people’s private wells.

If the owners were not there, we had to steal the water so we could bathe. One bucket of water was shared by several people for bathing. Even girls on their periods were forced to use those same conditions.

In general, the camp environment was difficult and not safe at all.

In that environment, the headteacher began forcing me into a sexual relationship. When I refused him, he gave me a leadership position at school and made me the head girl, and he also gave me the school keys.

But every time I went to return the keys in the evening, he wanted me to have sex with him. He would threaten me that if I refused, he would expel me from school, or he would tell my parents that I had committed a great offense, so that I would be kicked out. Because I wanted to study so much, I was afraid to say anything.

IN HIS OFFICE, THERE WAS A SOFA WHERE HE WOULD OFTEN PULL ME AND DROP ME, DOING WHATEVER HE WANTED WITH MY BODY.

After that, I would return to class, but I was unable even to study because of fear and stress.

He did not do this only to me; many girls went through that situation. Sometimes he even forced very young children. We knew among ourselves what was happening, but no one dared to say anything. He had threatened us that if anyone spoke, he would expel them from school.

He often called the girls one by one. When he called me, I tried to go with my friend, but if he saw the two of us, he would send my companion to the shop or to look for water.

The shop was far from the school, and at that time, the whole school was quiet because other classes were on holiday. The other teachers lived far away; only the headteacher and his wife lived near the school.

However, his wife did not realize what was happening, as she would come to teach grade one for a short time and then return home.

After finishing grade seven, I passed and joined Form One. However, it was when I reached Form One that I discovered I was pregnant. By that time, the teacher had committed those acts against me many times.

I was only 15 years old. I tried to continue studying for a while, but as the pregnancy continued to grow, I started to feel unwell and even vomited in class. Eventually, I was forced to drop out of school and return home.

I did not tell anyone about the pregnancy. It was my mother who discovered the changes in my body and asked me what was going on. Later, she took me to a nurse, where the tests showed I was pregnant. At home, a great conflict broke out. My brothers wanted to chase me away from home, but my father forbade them.

He said, “Where will she go now?” Others wanted the pregnancy to be terminated so I could return to school, but my father refused. He said the child in the womb also has a right to live.

After that, I remained at home. My brothers continued to blame me for not speaking up earlier. I tried to explain to them that I was afraid because the teacher threatened that if I spoke, he would ensure I was expelled. I really wanted to study, and that fear made me stay silent for a long time.

Later, my brothers went to report to the police and started looking for that teacher. However, to this day, I do not know what became of that case. At that time, they didn’t take me to a health center to get any assistance.

What hurt me the most was that I really desired to study, but that dream was suddenly cut short. That teacher also took away my virginity while I was still very young. To this day, it still hurts when I remember what happened.

MY MESSAGE TO OTHER GIRLS IS THAT IF THEY ENCOUNTER SUCH THINGS, THEY SHOULD NOT REMAIN SILENT. IT IS IMPORTANT TO REPORT EARLY TO PEOPLE WHO CAN HELP.

I stayed silent because of fear.

I also believe the system of student camps needs to be reconsidered because sometimes it provides an opportunity for some teachers to abuse students. If camps continue to exist, then there must be enough security and the presence of female teachers who can help and protect the girls.

I believe that if children are protected and listened to early, many of them will be able to continue with their educational dreams without being broken by violence.





A STOLEN CHILDHOOD'S LASTING IMPACTS



- Michelle (pseudonym).
- I am 33 years old.
- I studied up to Form Four.
- I live in Dar es Salaam.

I was born into a complex family situation where my mother and father are stepsiblings. My grandparents married when each of them had a child; those children are my mother and father. Later on, they began a relationship, and I was born.

My grandfather strongly disapproved of this relationship and ensured that they separated. After my mother separated from my father, life became extremely difficult. My mother was unable to care for me, so she took me to live with my grandmother so that I could at least have access to basic needs. At that time, I was about 18 months old.

WHEN I REACHED THE AGE OF FOUR AND BEGAN TO DEVELOP AWARENESS, AN ELDERLY MAN WHO WAS A FRIEND OF MY GRANDFATHER USED TO VISIT OUR HOME FREQUENTLY. I DON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHEN HE STARTED TO ABUSE ME, BUT BY THE TIME I BECAME MORE CONSCIOUS OF MY SURROUNDINGS, IT WAS ALREADY HAPPENING.

Whenever he came to our house, they offered him a stool to sit on. He would then make me sit on his lap. While I sat there, he would touch my private parts and rub his genitals against my body.

Although other people were present, no one noticed what he was doing because it usually happened in the evening when it was dark in the village. He forced me to memorize the name of his private parts so that I would believe this behavior was normal. I grew up thinking that all children experienced the same. He referred to me as his “fiancée,” and even my grandparents recognized him in that way.

I am now 33 years old, but experiences of violence in childhood do not simply remain as memories; they fundamentally disrupt one's entire life. There are times when I go through hardships, and I know the root cause is the sexual abuse I experienced. At other times, I face challenges in relationships, and I know it is because of him.

If I had been allowed to preserve my virginity or if I had been able to make my own choices about my body, perhaps I would have focused more on my education and made decisions independently. However, because of that experience, I lost my sense of agency. I lacked confidence and often found myself unable to make decisions.

By the age of eight, my body had already changed. My genital organs no longer resembled those of a child. Any man could sexually abuse me without difficulty. Even when playing children's games like hide and seek that involved inappropriate physical contact, I would notice that afterward, it felt as though nothing had happened to me. I realized that my body did not correspond to my age.

At nine years old, after the man who abused me disappeared, I found myself seeking attention from older boys and men. At that young age, it was not easy for older boys to approach me, so I often ended up having sex with boys my age. By the time I was in Standard Two or Three, I accepted any man who approached me. I did not value myself and lacked the confidence to refuse. It was not because I wanted the money or anything in return, but because I no longer saw my own worth. My heart and mind had been damaged to the point that I couldn't understand my value anymore.

At one point, my caregivers sat me down and advised me, saying, “*Michelle, do not involve yourself with men. If you do, you're your stomach will swell like wheat*”, meaning that I would become pregnant. They intended to guide me, but by then I had already been deeply affected. I continued living that way until around Standard Five. By that time, I was already fully engaged in sexual relationships and could be with any man.

When I reached Standard Six, I met a young man who took me away from home, and I began living with him as though we were husband and wife. My grandmother reported the matter to the police, but they told her not to worry and that I would eventually return. At that point, I lost all hope of returning to school or sitting for my Standard Seven examinations. I had not even completed the registration forms.

However, my teacher filled out the forms on my behalf so that I could still be registered. Life with that man was highly restrictive. I was confined indoors and not allowed to go out freely, even to bathe or fetch water. If another man looked at me, I would be beaten and questioned. He introduced me to alcohol, and I became heavily dependent on it. When we went to bars, if I stood up and another man also stood up, he beat me on suspicion that we were communicating. One day, the head teacher approached that man and requested that he allow me to return to sit for my examinations, explaining that the registration had already been completed. He agreed and provided me with the necessary materials. On the day of the examination, he instructed me to answer only the questions I knew.

However, when I arrived, I found that I knew many of the questions, so I answered all of them. When the results were released, I had passed and was selected to join an all-girls boarding school. My mother later came to the village to look for me. She met the man I had been living with, and I left with her, although I left all my belongings behind.

Within my community, I received no support apart from that of my grandmother and mother. Most people, including relatives, had already labeled me as a “troublemaking child” without morals. As a result, no one seemed to care about my situation. I only accessed medical support later in life, when I was already an adult. When I tested for HIV, I was relieved to learn that I was not infected. I would never wish for any child to experience violence. Someone may harm a child and consider it normal, but for that child, it completely disrupts their life. Even a child with great potential may never realize it because they carry lasting emotional and psychological scars. Government authorities need to establish stronger systems to follow up on and act upon reported cases to protect children from abuse.

IN MY CASE, MY GRANDMOTHER REPORTED IT TO THE POLICE, BUT THEY TOOK NO ACTION, EVEN THOUGH I REMAINED IN THE SAME VILLAGE. IF INTERVENTION HAD OCCURRED, MY LIFE MIGHT HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT.

Families must also be extremely cautious about people within their close circles. At one point, I was involved in a sexual relationship with my cousin. In the community, he was considered my brother, yet we were engaged in a relationship. I have since advised my daughter that even if it involves her own father, if anything inappropriate concerning her body occurs, she must raise an alarm immediately. I say this because such cases continue to be reported and seen even today. I want society to understand that violence exists, it has always existed, and it continues to exist. Even now, there may be a child experiencing abuse. One of the greatest challenges is that we remain silent. By the time someone speaks out, the damage is often already severe.

I STRONGLY WISH THAT THESE SITUATIONS WOULD BE IDENTIFIED AND REPORTED IN TIME. VIOLENCE IS REAL, AND IT IS DEEPLY ALARMING.





RUN OVER BY A CAR



- Amara (pseudonym).
- I am 38 years old.
- I have never attended school.
- I live in Tanga. I operate a bajaji for people with disabilities.

In the year 2000, my cousin approached me with romantic intentions, but I refused him. Our mothers are sisters, sharing the same parents. In 2007, he approached me again, and I refused once more. In 2017, he attempted to rape me while I was at his home. His mother had invited me over while she was attending a wedding, and no one else was there.

He came to his mother's house and told me to go to his house to collect some coconuts so that I could cook. I went to his nearby house, not knowing that he was following me from behind. He assaulted me, but I managed to overpower him, open the door, and run back to his mother's house. However, he had already anticipated this, so he followed me there,

confident that no one was around.

I entered the house, breathing heavily, and didn't even close the door, as I didn't expect him to follow me. When he caught up with me, he began to struggle with me. At that moment, his father arrived.

Upon hearing the commotion, he released me, and I escaped and went to my other cousin. I explained everything to him, and he said he would take care of the matter. I'm unsure how the issue was resolved.

In 2018, his mother invited me again during the Eid celebrations, and I went. On the third day of Eid, he arrived in a small car, and we greeted each other. As he approached, he threatened to hit me with the car, but at that time, I was sitting outside the house beside his mother.

WHEN HIS MOTHER STOOD UP AND MOVED AWAY, HE GOT BACK INTO THE CAR, DROVE TOWARD ME, AND DELIBERATELY RAN OVER ME, CAUSING INJURIES THAT HAVE LEFT ME PERMANENTLY DISABLED TO THIS DAY.

The only people present at the scene were members of his family. When they took me to Makorola Hospital, they reported that I had been injured by a collapsing wall.

At that time, I was unable to speak or move, so the hospital accepted their explanation.

Afterward, they transferred me to Bombo Hospital in Tanga town with the same report. I stayed there for four days before being referred to Muhimbili National Hospital.

The explanation that it was a wall accident was maintained, even though, in reality, he deliberately hit me with a car.

I later explained the truth to my mother, although my aunt had been present during the incident. While I was lying under the vehicle, my aunt saw me but did nothing.

I was taken to the hospital by neighbors and the perpetrator himself. Another relative arrived later but found that everything had already been handled.

After I returned home, I planned to pursue legal action, but my condition made it difficult. I had not lost consciousness, but I was unable to speak because I had sustained severe spinal injuries.

To communicate, someone had to place their ear close to my mouth. Despite this, I was fully aware of everything that was happening around me.

I also had difficulty breathing because both of my ribs were severely injured. He ran over me in reverse, crushed my ribs, then drove forward again and ran over me once more.

To this day, he doesn't even greet me. Neighbors saw the incident, but I couldn't follow up to understand how they explained it. The incident occurred in June, and they discharged me from the hospital at the end of August.

This incident has had a profound impact on my life, particularly financially. I can no longer run my dried fish business due to limited mobility. My mother is poor, and I need to return to Muhimbili Hospital for follow-up to check the functioning of the medical implants.

There have been no official family gatherings to discuss these incidents and I have not received any assistance from my relatives.

I once went to the police, but I was told that too much time had passed and that such cases must be reported within seven days. Another challenge is the lack of evidence, as no one from his family is willing to testify against him.

AFTER THE INCIDENT, MY HUSBAND AT THE TIME LEFT ME. HE HADN'T BEEN PRESENT DURING THE CELEBRATIONS AND REFUSED TO REPORT THE MATTER ANYWHERE.

INSTEAD, HE CHOSE TO SEPARATE FROM ME. HE HAS NEVER VISITED ME AT THE HOSPITAL, NOT EVEN ONCE.

I'm facing serious challenges with no family support. Without help, I can't afford hospital visits or rehabilitation, so I rely on diapers. While I may seem fine to others, only those close to me are aware of my difficulties.

Since my cousin refuses to take responsibility, I want the law to take its course. He has destroyed my life, yet he continues with his life as if nothing happened, while I am the one who suffers.

I URGE FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES TO LEARN FROM WHAT HAPPENED TO ME. SUCH CASES SHOULD NOT BE RESOLVED INFORMALLY WITHIN FAMILIES, AS THE CONSEQUENCES CAN BE SEVERE.

In my case, handling it as a family matter has left me to bear the full burden. My mother was not involved in the decisions, and she remained silent.

I am required to undergo physiotherapy at Bombo Hospital, where there is specialized rehabilitation equipment. Each session costs TZS 15,000, and I do not have health insurance.





WHEN RAPE LEADS TO CHILD MARRIAGE



- Najma (pseudonym).
- I am 27 years old.
- I studied up to Standard Seven.
- I live in Tanga. I am a food vendor.

After completing primary school, I moved to Tanga. While there, I met a man who got me pregnant with my first child before marrying me. After I gave birth, he came to my family and said, “I want to marry her and make her my wife.”

My family agreed, and he formally married me. While living with him, I had my second child.

At the beginning, when he first expressed interest in me, he spoke to my older sister and said he wanted to go out with me. At that time, I didn’t know what his intentions were. He told me that we were going to visit his mother, but instead of taking me to his home, he took me to a friend’s house.

Whenever I asked him, he kept telling me, “My mother is coming soon,” until it became evening. Later that night, when I asked him to take me back home, he refused. It was then that he forced himself on me.

It was an act of violence because I did not give my consent. He forced me into that situation and sexually assaulted me. I had not yet been with any man before.

I returned home and informed my sister, who then contacted my mother. He was called and admitted to what he had done. He said, “*It is true, but I will not leave her. I will marry her.*” At that time, I was only 15 years old. I was deeply disturbed by what happened, but I didn’t report the matter to the police; instead, I told my parents.

WE WENT TO THE HOSPITAL, WHERE THE DOCTORS CONFIRMED THE RAPE AND GAVE ME MEDICATION FOR THE PAIN. AT HOME, THE ELDERS ADVISED ME TO BATHE WITH HOT WATER AND TOLD ME NOT TO SEE HIM AGAIN UNTIL HE FORMALLY CAME TO MARRY ME.

However, he started visiting and providing for me as my partner, and the matter was settled within the family based on his promise to marry me.

He used to visit our home, although we were not often intimate. After a while, I became pregnant, and he formalized the relationship and showed me where he lived. He assured me that I could depend on him. He waited until after I gave birth before officially marrying me.

However, after we got married, his behavior changed. He became abusive, often beating me and coming home late at night. When I reported this to my family, they warned him, but the violence continued. The last time he beat me, my eye turned red, and I decided to go to the police.

They warned him that if he assaulted me again, he would be detained. He promised not to repeat it, and the police also told him that if it happened again, he would be required to write a divorce letter on the spot.

Despite this, he assaulted me again, beating me with a belt. I fled and returned to the police. I told them that I was exhausted and asked them to make him write a divorce letter immediately in their presence. They instructed him to do so, and he wrote the divorce letter. After that, I returned home.

THE EFFECTS OF EARLY MARRIAGE WERE SEVERE. I EXPERIENCED CONSTANT PHYSICAL ABUSE TO THE EXTENT THAT AT ONE POINT, I WOULD COUGH UP BLOOD AND HAD TO SEEK MEDICAL TREATMENT. MY HUSBAND RESTRICTED ME TO STAYING INDOORS; IF HE FOUND ME OUTSIDE, HE WOULD SLAP ME.

Yet being outside simply meant sitting with others within the household.

I struggle to provide for my children. If a child falls sick, I suffer alone and must accept any occasional jobs I can find. After my husband left and vanished, I now live alone with my children, while his family occupies the house he left behind.

Some people criticized me for having children at a young age because I had my first child without having breasts.

I always explain that these circumstances were beyond my control, and I could not abort the pregnancy at that young age. Despite not loving him, I accepted the marriage because he had already ruined my life.

It has been over five years since our separation, and I am not in a relationship. Initially, I felt anger at being abandoned while raising my children alone, but I have focused on their education and well-being.

I receive support from my sister, who is a teacher, and previously from his parents, though his mother has passed away.

I have daughters, and I pray to God that they do not experience what I have experienced. I take full responsibility for their safety. One is in Standard Five, and I advise them to be cautious, especially around boys who may offer money or other temptations, emphasizing the importance of making safe choices.

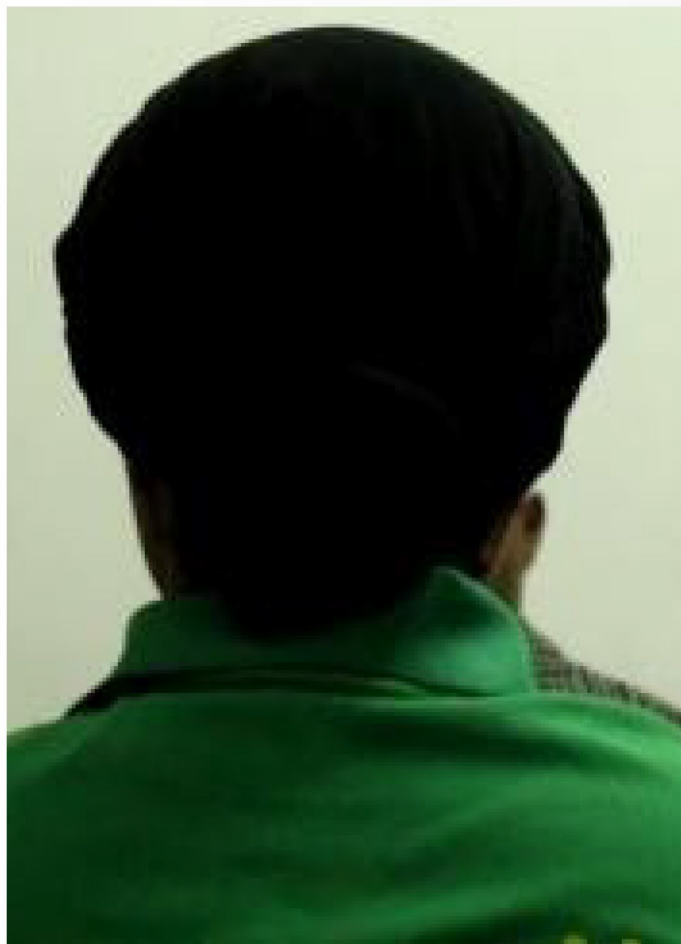
I WANT OTHER GIRLS TO BE CAREFUL ABOUT WHO THEY TRUST, TO RECOGNIZE WHEN SOMETHING FEELS WRONG, AND TO SPEAK OUT AND SEEK HELP. YOUR SAFETY AND YOUR VOICE MATTER.

Violence is real and continues to exist. Even boys are affected; they are also exposed to harmful behaviors and abuse. There are situations in which boys engage in inappropriate acts with each other. One day, I witnessed a boy telling another boy to remove his trousers.

I questioned what he intended to do, and when they saw me, they ran away. I went to inform the child’s mother, because I knew her, and advised her to speak to her child. Whether she took action or not, I cannot say, but such behaviors do exist.



SURVIVING AN ABUSIVE MARRIAGE



- Kyra (pseudonym).
- I am 50 years old.
- I studied up to Standard Seven.
- I live in Tanga. I am an entrepreneur.

At the beginning of our marriage, my husband and I lived peacefully. However, after several years, his behavior began to change. He started forcing me into sexual acts that I did not agree to.

He would bring coconut oil and insist that we perform these acts, which caused serious conflict between us. On more than one occasion, he forced himself on me despite my refusal. Because of this, I decided to seek help from our church leaders. My husband and I were called to meet with the pastor and his wife. I explained the challenges I was facing, but the pastor's wife said that I had disrespected my husband and that such matters were private and part of normal marital relations. This response deeply hurt me.

Around the same time, my husband began having relationships with several other women. He told me he had about four women and even asked me to choose one to live with as a co-wife, which I refused. At one point, he brought his brother's wife, who had recently undergone surgery, to stay in our house.

One day, we had an issue with electricity. Our prepaid meter had an outstanding debt of TZS 75,000. Because the recovering patient needed electricity and we had no phone to communicate, I used TZS 30,000 from household funds to buy electricity so it would not be disconnected.

When my husband found out, he became extremely violent. He strangled me with a piece of cloth (kanga), tied it around my neck and dragged me across the floor, and demanded that I return the money. I pleaded for my life and promised to repay him. To do so, I sold my radio deck, which I had bought for TZS 60,000, for only TZS 30,000.

Despite this, the abuse did not stop. On another occasion, around 9:00 p.m., he told me not to ask where he was going, saying he was going to someone who could 'take care of him.'

He returned around midnight and later said he would travel to Moshi. I helped prepare his belongings, but over time, I realized that he was slowly moving out without informing me. I believe he was influenced by another woman. By then, we had been married for about ten years.

As the violence continued and I was beaten several times, I finally sought help. I reported the matter to a local organization called Tree of Hope and to the police. He was arrested and detained. Later, our families intervened. My uncle took me in, while his father took him, and both families were instructed not to interfere with each other. Even then, the violence continued. At one point, he beat me so severely that I had to be taken to church, where the priest advised that the matter should be handled by the police. In January 2025, he attacked me once more.

He forced me to the ground and accused me of witchcraft, claiming I had caused him to lose his sexual ability with another woman. I reported the incident, and he was detained again. Although his father later asked for the matter to be resolved within the family, the police continued holding him until discussions took place between our families, after which he was released.

Still another assault took place, which led me to go to Bombo Hospital, where my husband tried to persuade the doctor to report that I had no injuries. Thankfully, community members accompanied me to the hospital to ensure my safety.

Although I did not go directly to the hospital or receive proper care when he first sexually assaulted me, because of his threats, I was later able to attend a general medical checkup after enduring the pain on my own.

This violence has had serious consequences on my health, as I was once admitted to Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Centre (KCMC) for seven months because of an assault. To cover medical expenses, I joined a women's savings group that helped me raise funds for treatment.

I have never received professional counseling. After the third major incident of violence, I decided to seek legal assistance to pursue a divorce. I was given a letter and instructed to follow up at the ward office.

However, they asked me to pay fees and present my marriage certificate. When I tried to obtain the certificate, I was told it was in Korogwe. I traveled there only to learn that the meeting had already taken place earlier that week, and I did not have enough money to return.

Through attending community meetings, I later realized that many other women had experienced similar violence in their marriages.

WHEN THE MOST RECENT CASE WENT TO COURT, THEY ASKED TO PRESENT EVIDENCE. UNFORTUNATELY, THE ONLY WITNESSES WERE MY HUSBAND'S RELATIVES, AND THEY DID NOT TESTIFY AGAINST HIM. AS A RESULT, HE WAS FOUND NOT GUILTY. THEY INFORMED ME THAT I COULD APPEAL THE DECISION IF I WANTED.

Today, I am grateful to be alive, although I still suffer from back pain caused by the violence. I currently need support to secure a safe place to live away from him.

MY MESSAGE TO THE POLICE IS THAT CASES OF VIOLENCE MUST BE HANDLED WITH FAIRNESS AND DILIGENCE. INVESTIGATIONS SHOULD BE CONDUCTED THOROUGHLY AND WITHOUT CORRUPTION.

Survivors should be given proper legal support, especially because many acts of violence occur in private and evidence can be difficult to obtain.

I ALSO CALL UPON HEALTH INSTITUTIONS TO ACT WITH INTEGRITY. MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS SHOULD NOT ACCEPT BRIBES TO FALSIFY MEDICAL REPORTS. NO ONE FALSELY ACCUSES ANOTHER PERSON WITHOUT REASON.

I lived with this man for twenty years; if I had been the problem, it would have become evident much earlier. I left the marriage with nothing, yet the suffering continues. To those experiencing sexual violence within marriage, I say this: do not remain silent. Seek help through legal channels and do not rely only on informal family resolutions, because the consequences often continue and affect even children and future generations. No one should stay in a marriage where they are unsafe or not valued. It is better to find small ways to survive and live safely than to remain with a harmful partner.

To society, I say this: violence must end. Everyone deserves respect and protection. When violence is witnessed, it should be reported, and perpetrators must be held accountable.



LIVING WITH HIV



- Mina (pseudonym).
- I am 23 years old.
- My education went up to Form Two.
- I live in Dar es Salaam. I'm a food vendor.

I was born in the Mwanza Region. In our family, we were nine children, and my mother struggled to provide for all of us. Due to financial difficulties, she sent me to live with my aunt so that I could continue with my studies.

Before I left home, my mother warned me to be careful because there were health challenges within that household. Although I felt afraid and didn't want to go, I had no choice because of our difficult economic situation. At that time, I was still a primary school pupil and determined to continue my education. One day, when my aunt went to church, I remained at home with my uncle.

He approached me and told me that he wanted to have sex with me. I refused him. But he tied me with a rope with my legs apart like an animal and sexually assaulted me.

After finishing, he threatened me, warning that he would kill me if I told anyone. I kept silent because of fear and did not report the incident, not even to my mother. I was only in Standard Four. Although my mother later noticed changes in my behavior and repeatedly asked what was wrong, I could not find the courage to explain what had happened. After some time, I became ill and developed shingles (herpes zoster) on my back.

MY MOTHER EVENTUALLY TOOK ME TO THE HOSPITAL FOR MEDICAL TESTS. THE RESULTS REVEALED THAT I HAD BEEN INFECTED WITH HIV. WHEN SHE ASKED HOW THIS HAD HAPPENED, I FINALLY TOLD HER ABOUT THE ASSAULT.

My mother was deeply distressed and cried when she heard the truth.

Later, I moved to live with my older sister in Katoro so that she could help care for me. At first, the situation was manageable, but over time, she began mistreating me and accusing me of immoral behavior. She blamed me for my illness, even though she knew the circumstances that had led to it. Her accusations caused me deep emotional pain. Eventually, I left and traveled to Kahama to look for work in the mining areas.

I continued taking my medication, which was intended to last for six months. However, after only one month, my bag containing both money and medicine was stolen. I explained the situation to the woman I was staying with, and she assisted me in visiting a hospital.

The doctor provided medication for one month and advised me to return home because my clinic records were with my sister. When I returned, my sister acknowledged that she had been wrong and apologized for how she had treated me. I stayed with her for some time before deciding to travel to Dar es Salaam in search of better opportunities. A friend encouraged me to go there, saying that my talents in singing and acting might help me build a better future. When I arrived at Magufuli Bus Terminal in Dar es Salaam, the friend I had traveled with abandoned me. At that time, I was still taking medication but had no

food or a stable place to stay. Eventually, a kind woman noticed my situation and allowed me to stay at her home. However, the living conditions were difficult. Whenever her husband returned home at night, I was required to sleep outside to give them privacy.

After some time, I found work at a small food stand where they were selling chips. I would remain there after work and sleep in the same place. One night, a group of young men attacked me. I was unable to call for help, and after the assault, I remained in pain but told no one about what had happened.

Several weeks later, I began noticing changes in my health. When I went to the hospital, the doctors informed me that I was pregnant. The news devastated me because I did not know which of the men responsible for the attack had caused the pregnancy, and at that time, I had no stable home. I felt overwhelmed and hopeless.

Despite my situation, I continued working and sleeping at the food stand, even though the environment was unsafe, especially during pregnancy. One day, I suddenly began bleeding and experienced severe abdominal pain. A man who lived nearby saw that I was in distress and asked what had happened.

He took me to the hospital and paid for my treatment. Later, he also helped me rent a small room in Manzese. Because of the support he provided during such a difficult time, I now regard him as a brother. After recovering, I managed to find work in the Shekilango area, which helps me cover rent and basic living expenses. Alongside my work, I continue to practice singing and acting, hoping that these talents may open opportunities for me in the future.

I have never received formal psychological counseling. I find it difficult to trust people because of my past experiences. On one occasion, I confided in a friend about my situation, but she exposed my medical condition to others in the neighborhood by showing them my medication. That experience made it even harder for me to trust anyone again.

To this day, I still struggle to understand why my uncle abused me. My aunt was often strict and sometimes treated me harshly. For example, she would cut her child's nails and then cut mine, sometimes injuring me accidentally.

I never fully understood why she behaved that way. Apart from telling my mother, I never reported the abuse to any authority because I felt that no one would believe or support me.

Even now, I still carry a visible scar from the illness I developed after the assault. Whenever I see it, it reminds me of what happened and brings back painful memories. I often fear entering romantic relationships. When men notice the scar and ask questions about it, the memories return. On one occasion, I was in a relationship with a man who later discovered my health condition. Instead of understanding, he reacted violently and threatened to harm me if he saw me again. That experience made me feel rejected and hopeless.

Sometimes I reflect on how different my life might have been if my father had been alive. He had property and wealth, but after his death, our relatives took everything. My mother was struggling to raise us on her own.

I have only received steady medical care in the form of treatment and medication for my condition. Beyond that, I have largely depended on my own strength and the occasional help of kind individuals.

MY MESSAGE IS THAT PARENTS AND GUARDIANS MUST EXERCISE GREAT CAUTION WHEN ENTRUSTING CHILDREN TO OTHERS. CHILDREN'S SAFETY SHOULD NEVER BE COMPROMISED DUE TO ECONOMIC HARDSHIP. THERE IS ALSO A CRITICAL NEED FOR GREATER SOCIETAL RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT CHILDREN AND TO SUPPORT SURVIVORS OF ABUSE WITH DIGNITY, CARE, AND APPROPRIATE SERVICES.





WHAT THESE STORIES TELL US

Taken together, these stories reveal patterns that cannot be ignored.

They show how violence is rarely a single moment. It often unfolds slowly, through silence, permission, neglect, and power left unchecked. In many cases, harm was not only caused by an individual, but sustained by the spaces around them: homes, schools, workplaces, communities, and systems that failed to intervene.

Silence appears again and again.
Silence born of fear.
Silence shaped by shame.
Silence reinforced by disbelief, threats, or the promise that speaking out would only make things worse. In many stories, silence was not chosen freely; it was imposed.

Power is another recurring thread.
Power linked to age, authority, money, gender, education, or social position. Power that allowed some voices to dominate while others were dismissed or doubted. Power that made resistance dangerous and reporting risky. In many cases, the imbalance itself became a weapon.

Systems are present — even when they are absent.
Police stations that could not act.
Health facilities that documented without protecting.
Schools that transferred the problem instead of addressing it.
Families and institutions that chose reputation over safety.
The harm did not end because the structures meant to respond were often unprepared, inaccessible, or unwilling.

These stories also remind us that survival does not follow a single path. There is no “right” way to respond to violence. Strength is not always loud. Healing is not linear. Some survivors spoke up quickly. Others carried their stories for years. None of these choices diminish the truth of what they endured.

What emerges most clearly is not weakness, but endurance.
These stories do not ask for pity.
They ask for responsibility.

Responsibility to listen.
Responsibility to protect.
Responsibility to question the norms and systems that allow harm to continue unnoticed.

If there is one message these stories leave behind, it is this:

Violence thrives where silence is expected.
Change begins where listening becomes action.



CALL TO ACTION

These stories don’t end here.
They continue in what we choose to do next.
Listening is important - but it is not enough.

COMMUNITIES & INDIVIDUALS

- Speak out when harm is suspected, not only when it is proven.
- Challenge harmful norms and beliefs that normalize violence or silence survivors.
- Create safe spaces where survivors can speak and report violence without fear.
- Stop blaming survivors for what was done to them.
- Stop calling violence a “private matter”.

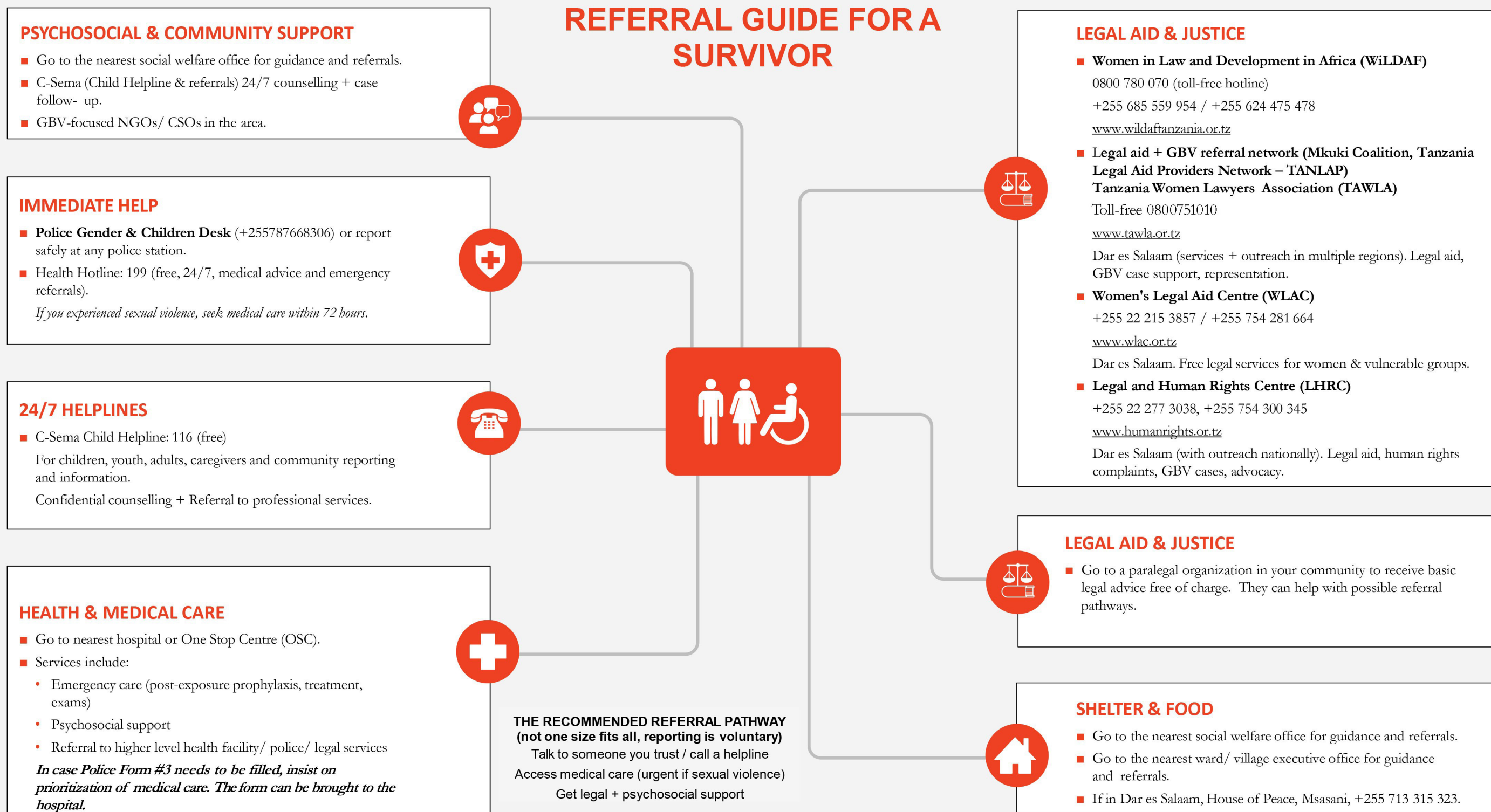
INSTITUTIONS

- Center survivor dignity, safety and confidentiality.
- Treat every report seriously and without delay.
- Adopt survivor-centered approaches among law enforcement and judiciary.
- Guarantee free and timely medical care, including PF3 forms, emergency contraception, rape kits, PEP, and proper documentation for all survivors.
- Strengthen psychosocial support and social welfare officers.
- Expand awareness and free legal aid services across all districts.
- Establish and fund more safe houses and fit-family shelters.
- Ensure justice and support are accessible to all and hold perpetrators accountable.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

Violence survives through silence, denial and inaction.
These stories were shared with courage.
Now, responsibility belongs to all of us.







ABOUT THE PROJECT

This book is the result of a project running from August 2025 to June 2026, to enhance the public’s understanding of the effects of sexual and gender-based violence on survivors.

It was implemented by Women Action Towards Economic Development (WATED), in collaboration with the Access to Justice for Women and Children / Society in Action for Equality (SAFE) programme, jointly implemented by GIZ Tanzania and the Ministry of Constitutional and Legal Affairs (MoCLA).

During the project phase, 25 survivors from Dar es Salaam, Dodoma, and Tanga shared their stories and received psycho-social support. The stories are shown through a travel exhibition in the three regions and featured in a documentary.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book exists because of courage, trust, and collective care.

First and foremost, we extend our sincere appreciation to the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania, the relevant departments, and the local government authorities of Tanga and Lushoto (Tanga), Bahi, Chamwino and Dodoma (Dodoma), and Temeke and Kindondoni (Dar es Salaam) for their cooperation, support, and permission in the implementation of this project.

These conversations sought to deepen understanding of the challenges facing women and communities. We extend our deepest gratitude to the survivors who chose to share their stories. Your voices carry truth, pain, strength, and dignity. This book would not have been possible without your bravery and trust.

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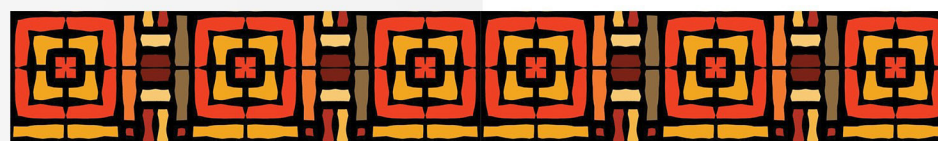
Finally, we acknowledge every individual, organization, and community member who believes that silence is not an option, and that listening is the first step toward justice.

Our heartfelt appreciation goes to the Board of Directors of WATED for their guidance, encouragement, and unwavering support in enabling the implementation of this important work.

With humility and appreciation, we thank everyone who walked this journey with us.

Maria Matui

Executive Director, WATED



BREAKING THE SILENCE



BREAKING THE SILENCE brings together the voices that are too often silenced. This book is a collection of true testimonies from women and girls across Tanzania who have survived sexual and gender-based violence. These are not stories told about them, they are stories told by them, in their own words, carrying pain, resilience, and the courage to speak.

From childhood abuse to forced marriage,
from exploitation in schools and workplaces to violence
hidden within families and traditions, these voices reveal what society chooses not to see.

This book exists to listen.
To remember.
And to demand that silence ends.



JAMHURI YA
MUUNGANO
WA TANZANIA

WIZARA YA
KATIBA NA
SHERIA



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