



Almaz Yosef, head of the women and social affairs office for Afambo Woreda, in Afar Region poses for a photo while sharing her experience of early marriage that at times led to conflicts among families, and what she contributes as a woman in a place of authority to affect perceptions and regulations positively. Photo: Mercy Corps Ethiopia/ Olivia Chapman, 2024

## EMPOWERING WOMEN AND MAINTAINING PEACE

### A COMMUNITY INITIATIVE THAT IS CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AROUND MARRIAGE PRACTICES AND CONTRIBUTING TO PEACE

Aaisha, a 15-year-old spirited schoolgirl in a small village located in the Afambo Woreda of the Afar Region, Ethiopia, find solace and joy in the simple act of walking to school with her friends. In her blue school uniform, neatly pressed and her hair modestly veiled beneath her hijab, she walks with her friends to school. The girls giggle and talk in low tones as they walk down the dirt path to the local high school.

Yet, behind their carefree camaraderie lies a harsh reality poised to overshadow their innocence, when they are considered to be of age for marriages. Aaisha, however, is determined to continue her education before even thinking of marriage. She has been lucky enough to get out of the arranged marriage, promised by her mother, under the Absuma marital practice. Once a wife, education and possibility of work are unlikely prospects for young girls.

The Absuma marital practice refers to a traditional Afari marriage system where at birth girls are automatically assigned to marry a relative from their mother's family (normally a first cousin). As a result, they are not permitted to choose whether to marry, when to marry or who to marry.

The regional government has been making efforts to engage communities in conversations aimed at reforming some of the cultural practices that hinder the successful start of girls to education and their future lives. The peace committee is one instrument to these efforts. The committee's commitment to empowering girls and young women who are silenced in discussion of marriage have changed the trajectory of Aaisha's life.

Stood in the shade, outside her office, Almaz Yosef, the head of the women and social affairs office for Afambo Woreda, in Afar, proudly looks on at Aaisha and her friends as they pass by her office to their school. Once back inside her office, Almaz explains that Aaisha is still able to attend school rather than attend to the husband her mother picked out for her as a result of the "community conversation and action for reducing Absuma conflict" project. Whilst explaining Aaisha's situation she pulls out a large book that contains the contract that will continue to protect Aaisha's rights.

It's this reality that pushed Almaz and the other committee members to choose to support girls and young women who are affected by this marital practice, fighting to give them a voice within cultural systems that continue to silence them.

"We have a long way to go and a lot to address to allow women to fully access economic opportunities and be heard by the community" she says. "There are still issues of gender-based violence including Female Genital Mutilation, forced and underage marriage".

## **Approaching Conflict Prevention from A Different Angle**

With many cases of conflict occurring in the woreda as a result of disagreements when the girl is forced into marriage, instead of being able to choose, Almaz and her team took on the challenge of empowering these girls and educating the community in collaboration with Mercy Corps' Gender and Conflict Sensitive Approaches to Peace Building in Ethiopia (GCAP) project, an extension of the RIPA North program initiative.

"When GCAP came, we had to come up with a proposal, so we turned to the community. They identified farmland disputes and the Absuma marital practice as key causes of conflict. We decided to focus on the Absuma marital practice, as it impacts women the most", notes Almaz.

The GCAP program has provided 200,000 ETB (approximately 3,500 USD) funding for the peace committee in the Afambo woreda to train 100 people in 4 kebeles (25 per kebele) to undertake the task of holding community conversations and take action to protect the rights of women under Absuma marriages.



**“In Afar, we say that girls are the hand of their mothers and boys of their fathers, therefore marriages are arranged for girls by their mothers. Normally they are promised to a family member of their mother’s side” explains Almaz. This practice poses problems for multiple reasons, but the team focused their efforts on ensuring girls get a choice in who they marry, and only marry once they are 18.”**

“When we first proposed the project, the question was; isn’t this going to be hard? ... but we agreed to try and so we threw ourselves into it. We had to be open”.

Since starting the community dialogues in their operational kebeles, the peace committee has been able to prevent 4 marriages, three of which were handled by the peace committee. The team has a reporting system, whereby discussions are held with the girl’s parents, after the girl has been able to speak to Almaz and explain her situation.

“We ask the parents why they want to force their daughter into a marriage that she doesn’t want. And in most cases explain the issues around underage marriage, particularly that their bodies aren’t ready for childbirth” Almaz explains. “And in all the cases we were able to get the parents to sign a contract that prohibits marriage under the age of 18, allows girls to be included in the decision-making process and therefore encourage them to allow their daughter to finish school.”

## **Initiative well embraced by community members**

Gisti, a community member who was part of the community dialogue received training on preventing early marriages in her village. She was the informant who brought Aaisha’s situation to the attention of Almaz and the peace committee.

“There were two problems; the age of the girl and she also didn’t consent to the marriage; she didn’t love him. So, the girl came to me, and because I had taken training, I understood the problems she was facing,” says Gisti. She explained the challenges Aaisha would face as an underage bride to the parents and the potential conflict that could arise. She finally brought Aaisha to Almaz to get support.



Gisti and Fatuma Mohammed, fellow advocate for women and girls rights and preventing conflicts, pose for a quick photo.  
Mercy Corps/Olivia Chapman, 2024

Gisti assisted Aaisha's parents in comprehending the concerns around the promised marriage. Sat in women and social affairs office, she recounts explaining that there would be difficulties in illegally marrying Aaisha off to her uncle, particularly because "her body would not be able to handle the rigors of childbirth s she was still a child herself".

"Gosas [Clan chiefs] were involved in the discussion and the agreement for the girl's right to be recognized, allowing her to choose her own husband when she is old enough to marry" Gisti explains "A contract was signed to ensure that these promises are kept". The issue of women's rights within the Absuma practice gains more serious attention by including highly respected community members and addressing concerns that affect all community members, regardless of age or gender Along with Aaisha, another 2 cases have come across Almaz's desk. Both are stories of underage girls who were to be married off under the Absuma practice without the consent of the girls.

"One of these girls we found in hospital, when she was being tested for HIV before the wedding. We could tell she was a young girl" Almaz explains. "It was the family trying to marry her off, specifically the father because he was very sick and wanted to be there for the wedding. He said let me die in peace, knowing my daughter is married. But we managed to intervene and change the course of her life," says Almaz. Though the wedding was stopped at the time, when the young girl's father passed, the girl was taken in by some relatives in Chifra [a town in the north of Afar] town to avoid other family member's trying to marry her off.

As Almaz flips through the pages of the book that hold the contexts of each case and the contracts that support the rights of the three girls, she explains the final case.

"The other girl was empowered to take matters into her own hands. She went to my boss and reported it herself, and then she was brought to me, and I spoke to the family. We got the parents to sign a contract that prohibits her getting married before 18." The contact also demands that the young girl finishes school and has the right to choose who she marries in the future.



**"It's necessary to make them sign the contracts to empower the girls.  
It's simply about respecting their rights."**

Having herself grown up in a community where women are seen as second-hand citizens, Almaz recognizes the importance of education for girls. "I put myself through school and now have a university diploma" she explains. "When my father died and my mum was sick, I worked to allow my brother to go to university, even though I hadn't been able to finish high school. Eventually, after all my siblings finished school, I was able to finish and go to university. I worked and attended as many classes as I could". Now Almaz aims to enable all girls to finish school and have the same economic opportunities as their male counterparts believing that education empowers girls and allows them to lead better lives.



Gisti Mohammed poses with her 4 daughters and niece who live in her household. Photo: Mercy Corps Ethiopia/ Olivia Chapman, 2024

Under the shade of the trees, Gisti Mohammed gathers with her 4 daughters and niece for a picture. She explains that she now understands that allowing them to marry for love is so much better. All in bright colorful clothes and smiles, each of the girls proudly announce what grade they are in at school and their intentions for the future. The mother of 8 is the perfect example of the way the conversations are empowering women and girls, and people are recognizing the harmful effects of such pre-arranged marital practices.

“When I was younger, this wasn’t even something questioned, but there was always conflict when the girl disagreed with who she was forced to marry. So, I was married in the Absuma practice because I didn’t even know there was another option.” Gisti explains.

However, the way Gisti views the traditional marriage practice has completely transformed; “Since taking the training, I now see the benefits of marrying for love... and will allow my daughters to do this”.

Gisti wishes that the community will be able to see things the way she sees them now and follow Almaz’s path to achieving the desired equality and respect for women and girls in Afambo.

As Almaz put it “it’s a matter of respecting women’s rights and letting us marry who we want”.

The Absuma practice has been one of the areas that the GCAP program supported community conversations as part of its efforts of encouraging practices which enhance peace building practices and prevent conflicts. Funded by GAC, and supported by Mercy Corps’ RIPA North, GCAP worked with community institutions and government partners to positively affect the lives of young women like Aaisha, and challenge attitudes for a more peaceful and inclusive communities.

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**Resilience in Pastoral Areas – North (RIPA-North)** is a five-year, \$38 million USAID-funded program operating in lowland areas of Somali, Oromia and Afar regions of Ethiopia (2020 – 2025). RIPA-North aims to improve the resilience capacities of households, markets, and governance institutions, collectively contributing to enhanced food security and inclusive economic growth.