

Bride price: Seeing Through other People's Eyes

It's funny how sometimes you see things through the eyes of other people and suddenly you realise how much you have so forgotten. And the feelings come rushing back. That happened to me a week or so ago when a couple of cameramen, Kevin and Chris, came to help me interview people for a documentary film we are making on bride price. I was feeling rather weary not just from the long journey from Kampala to Tororo but from the recent ruling by the Constitutional Court voting to uphold bride price as a culture and thereby effectively voting against years of MIFUMI's work and campaign to reform this outrageous, outmoded culture.

As you may be aware, bride price is the payment extracted from a man by the parents of the girl he wants to marry. The amount demanded for bride price, paid in cows or cash, has so increased over the years making it really hard for poor young men to pay up. This sets the marriage off to a poor start with the groom resenting how much he has paid for the bride and extracting his dues from her through hard labour, unquestioned obedience or violence. The bride is also caught up in the culture which demands that she can only leave the relationship, however abusive it becomes, if her parents return the bride price.



Atuki Turner, Exec. Director

MIFUMI has intervened on behalf of hundreds of women caught up in such a situation by winning them the right to leave violent partners or by rescuing their parents from the debt of bride price. Now here I was in the east of Uganda, and in tow were two men who were meeting bride price, face to face for the first time. In their eyes I could see the shock and horror as the stark reality of the suffering and sadness that bride price leaves in its wake confronted them.

And suddenly I too was seeing with them and feeling with them all over again.

I was seeing bride price again in ways I had forgotten that I knew. Kevin, the Director of Photography, was incredulous as he listened to the women narrate their stories. This quickly turned to outrage as he listened to the story of Alupo, a young woman whose husband forced her to breastfeed his puppies. He said this was because the cows that would normally give milk for the puppies were given away to Alupo's parents as bride price. Sadly Alupo's baby whom she was also breastfeeding acquired rabies and died. When Alupo went back to her home, her father shouted at her and threatened to beat her. He sent her back insisting he had no cows to pay back Alupo's husband. Now the Father is insisting she remarry so that he can demand for 3 cows as bride price for her, two of these, he reasons, will be used to pay the bride price refund debt to Alupo's husband and one will remain for him. Action Aid Uganda intervened and bought Alupo a piece of land and built a small house for her and her three children. Now Alupo is worried because her husband is threatening to legally attach the house as payment for his bride price debt.

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Then we came across the story of, let's call her Jessica, whose husband chased her away when she was diagnosed with cancer. He did not want to be burdened with a sick wife. Now struggling with a terminal illness and struggling with medical bills, Jessica is struggling to refund the bride price that her husband is demanding more and more aggressively.

But more horrors were awaiting us. First we had interviewed a priest in the Diocese who narrated how he once had to run from Church when irate parents and relatives of the bride stormed into church brandishing sticks and demanding that the wedding be stopped because bride price had not been paid! Then our blood went cold as we listened to the story of Deborah. Her 15 year old daughter, let's call her Betty, a candidate in Primary Seven, was tricked by her Father into visiting her aunt. This happened while her mother was away from home attending a burial. At her Aunt's place she was shown to a hut and at bedtime a man walked in and said he was her new husband and imprisoned her there for a week, raping her every night.

On the third night, the girl saw her Father talking with the man and she thought that rescue was at hand, only to have her hopes dashed when she saw money exchange hands and her father walk away. She then managed to escape and ran home and told all to her mother Deborah. When her Mother asked the Father why he was selling their young daughter, he said he had been paid 90,000 shillings (\$45) and had been promised a couple of cows. He was very angry with his wife for messing up his "business deal" and threw her and all her children out of the house, despite the fact that she was pregnant.



Will she be paid for?

Then he burnt all their clothes. Still not satisfied, he looked for her and found her one morning on the way to MIFUMI advice centre, where he beat her up and tried to abort the child she was carrying using his hands. Betty who watched all this happening was so traumatized that she ran away from the scene and was only found many months later at an Aunt's in the next district, where she in hospital having given birth to a baby who was HIV+.

By this time the cameramen were hopping mad. They were seriously disturbed and determined to join MIFUMI's campaign on bride price, to end this outrage and end it quickly. When we got back to the city, Kevin could not stop talking about the woman who was forced to feed puppies, the woman dying of cancer and struggling to repay bride price, the woman whose husband tried to abort their child by the roadside and of-course about Maria, the woman whose husband planted a grenade in her charcoal stove, which blew up in her face, because she was trying to protect their children's property from being sold by the husband, a husband who is now also demanding his bride price back.

All at once, I realised that in campaigning about bride price over 10 years, I had become so lost in the details of the work that needed to be done, that I had forgotten the people and the human suffering behind bride price. I had become so engrossed in decisions about whether to involve the police or the courts, how to react to a magistrate's unjust ruling against a woman, how to lodge our bride price appeal and how to frame our petition, that for a long time, I had forgotten how I used to feel about bride price. Being out in the field and seeing the emotional impact that these women's stories had on the two cameramen, and seeing the empathy and determination to do something about it, that it created in them, reminded me how I once felt. I saw again the suffering involved. I saw again how we were eroding our dignity as human beings, as parents, as women, as girls with this culture of bride price. But the grim reaction of Kevin and Chris also gave me hope. In their face to face meeting with the horrors of bride price and their reaction against it, I saw that there was hope that the more people we could get to appreciate the horrors of bride price, the more likely we would be to change this culture for the better. The documentary that will be released soon, is one way to get this story out there to the people who have the power to change things. I very much look forward to the day we air it in Uganda when seeing bride price through the eye of the camera may remind people of feelings that otherwise may remain unstirred. Let's not get to be like James Bond's scotch on rocks, shaken but not stirred.



Empowering women to make poverty history by Simon Ndira

“Fish for a man and you feed him once, teach a man how to fish and you feed him forever”

MIFUMI through MIFETI (Mifumi Ethical Trade Initiatives) empowers different women groups through innovative economic empowerment activities in an effort to reduce poverty, which is both a cause and effect of domestic violence and all other forms of discrimination against especially women, but also children.

We believe that addressing poverty will help in removing, reforming or relaxing all forms of bad traditional and cultural practices that affect women and children negatively. These include but are not limited to bride price, widow inheritance, property rights violations, polygamy, child abuse including defilement, early marriages, forced marriages and early school dropout, whose underlying factors directly or indirectly contribute to domestic violence.

We economically empower women’s groups at the community level across the twenty one advice centres, present in the nineteen sub-counties of Tororo district. We train women in business development through the VSLAs (Village Savings Loans Schemes) and help them set up savings schemes, that we in turn part fund to boost their income. The loan schemes are managed entirely by these women, who are graduating from women’s groups to professionally organized CBOs (Community Based Organizations) with the help of MIFUMI.

Through MIFETI Produce Centre, MIFUMI has established a direct linkage with the women’s groups. We encourage women to grow crops, especially sim sim and ground nuts with the guarantee that we shall purchase it from them at competitive pricing. The sim sim and ground nuts purchased are in turn processed by women working at the Produce Center into sesame paste that is then sold to the open market. Profits are distributed among the women groups using a zero-sum profit strategy.

We firmly believe that one day our women will say good bye to poverty in line with the MDG3 goals and thus be independent enough to say no to all forms of violence that insubordinates them in society.

Polygamy can be Worse than Divorce to Children By Donna Tara

You may say divorce is the most painful experience for children until you have lived in a polygamous family where you have both parents but only know one.

In a divorce, your parents; who are two mature adults make a decision to move on (in most cases with the interest of you at heart so you do not get caught up in their differences or grow up in a violent unhappy home) and you get to have two loving parents, who will either through custody agreements, legal requirements or love for you, get to see you and be part of your life as you grow and provide for your needs.

With polygamy the opposite is true.

First there is the absentee demi-god father who you only get to see either at dinner time or when you have been summoned in his presence. His loyalty and attention shifts from you and your mother and is divided among his numerous wives. You do not know that man because you never talk much. You are raised by your mother who reveres him. To you he becomes the father you may never get to know.

Then there are jealousies and rivalries among your several mothers as each competes for affection and resources for themselves and their children and her children. Sometimes you get caught between these arguments and fights and wonder what you did wrong to deserve all this.

If it so happens that your mother dies leaving you with this already absentee father and several step mothers, you will automatically take on all the tongue and physical lashing intended for your mother. But what do you know, you are only a child. You are also most likely to be used as cheap labour by your step mothers. Your absentee father is nowhere to notice your suffering and your need to bond with him now that your mother is gone.

There are more chances for you as a child to be abused, neglected and denied your basic rights in a polygamous home than with divorced parents.

And if it so happens that you are the oldest of the children and you luckily got an education, you will never enjoy the fruits of your labour as three quarters of your life will be spent raising and educating your numerous siblings. You inherit your father’s sins.

Polygamy has no place in these times characterized by credit crunches and poverty.

What does MIFUMI do?

MIFUMI	A women's rights agency
Domestic Violence	Supporting women access justice and security
21 Advice Centres	Providing counselling and support throughout Tororo
Bride Price	Leading the way on Bride Price reform
Women's Property Rights	Supporting greater economic security for women
Health	Quality Health Service at Mifumi Health Centre
Education	Quality education at Mifumi Primary School
Sure Start	Confidence building for girls through martial arts
Scholarships	Providing sponsorship to bright but needy children
Solar Lighting	Reducing environmental degradation in 4 villages
Polygamy	Seeking to address cultural issues that oppress women
Ethical Trading	Uplifting economic status of women
Legal Aid	Legal services and training practitioners
MIFUMI network	Co-ordination of 20 partners in 5 districts

www.mifumi.org

MIFUMI's mission is to

Protect women and children from domestic violence and abuse and secure for them basic rights through Education, Health Care and economic self sufficiency.

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