

Miriam's story

Miriam is 36 years old and the mother of six children. She grew up in a village 400 kilometers away from the capital city of her country. She stopped schooling after her second grade. Her parents were poor, and the school was three kilometers away from the village. Her father believed that educating a girl was like 'watering the neighbor's garden'.

When she was 12, Miriam was circumcised, as was the custom in her tribe. At 16, she was married to a man three times her age. Her father received a substantial lobola. The very next year, she gave birth at home, to a baby boy. The baby was stillborn. The health centre was 10 kilometers away, and anyway, did not attend deliveries. Miriam believed that the baby was born dead because of the repeated beatings and kicks she had received all through her pregnancy. Instead, she was blamed for not being able to bear a healthy baby.

Miriam's husband considered it his right to have sex with her, and regularly forced himself on her. Miriam did not want to get pregnant again and again but had little choice in the matter. She had no time to go to the health clinic, and when she went sometimes because her children were sick, she was hesitant to broach the subject of contraception with the nurse.

Her life with her husband was a long saga of violence. Miriam struggled to keep body and soul together through her several pregnancies and raising her children. She had to farm her small plot of land to feed her children, because her husband never gave her enough money. She approached the parish priest several times for help. He always advised her to have faith in God and keep her sacraments.

One day her husband accused Miriam of 'carrying on' with a man in the village. He had seen Miriam laughing and chatting with the man, he claimed. When she answered back, he hit her with firewood repeatedly on her knees saying 'you whore! I will break your legs' Miriam was badly injured; she thought she had a fracture. For weeks she could not move out of the house. But she did not have any money to hire transport to go to the health centre. Unable to go to the market to trade, she had no income and literally starved.

Miriam was terrified of further violence. She had had enough. As soon as she could walk, she took her two youngest and left the village. She now lives in a strange village, a refugee in her own country, living in fear of being found by her husband and brought back home.